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DRAMATIC AUTHOR'S  
COMPANION

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A THEATRICAL MANAGER'S READER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY  
ARTHUR BOURCHIER, M.A.

MILLS & BOON, LIMITED  
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## INTRODUCTION

I AM very glad to welcome the appearance of such a book as this, more especially as the author has had a long experience in reading plays, and I am in complete agreement with him that perhaps the most distinguishing feature of those sent by the "Great Unacted" is the sad lack of technical knowledge and of stage possibilities. Even those plays that show real merit and originality generally require a great deal of overhauling and revising before they are fit for production. All this tends to wearisome rehearsals, delayed production, and often a great deal of extra expense, and there can be no greater pleasure to a manager than to read a MS. by an unknown and untried author, fit to be put into immediate rehearsal. There is no reason why this should not be so, for technique is surely a thing that is acquirable by any one of ordinary intelligence. Should this little book do anything to help would-be authors to acquire that technique, it will come as a boon and a blessing, not only to them, but also to the unfortunate managers and their readers who have to wade through their efforts, and it gives me very much pleasure to wish it God-speed on its useful and friendly little mission.

ARTHUR BOURCHIER.

*July 1910.*





## PREFACE

THE object of this little book is purely practical. It is written to help the young author, who, foolishly or otherwise, has burned his boats behind him, and intends to depend, if possible, solely upon writing plays for his living, and whose first need, consequently, is to make it pay. To do this requires an intimate knowledge not only of the basic principles underlying all drama, but of the form and fashion in which it has to be presented at any given time, and also of contemporary mechanical and economic conditions. Some years' experience has shown the writer that the average would-be dramatist is woefully ignorant on these points. Many plays submitted show some talent and originality, but very few any common-sense, an equally valuable commodity! Although this is regrettable in one sense, it is hopeful in another, for these practical considerations are more easily acquired than the artistic ones.

To illustrate his remarks the author has drawn upon scenes, etc., in the more familiar classics and in various modern plays that have recently been produced and may be fresh in the memory of his readers. It is thus hoped that the book, whilst having no pretensions to being an infallible guide



on "How to write a good play," may be a useful companion to the dramatist and keep him reminded of practical considerations.

Whilst the author has had a good deal of experience in reading plays, he has had none at all in writing books, therefore he craves the reader's indulgence and trusts that what he has to say may be some compensation for the way he says it.

In view of a recent controversy he makes no apology for bringing in Aristotle!

His thanks for permission to quote somewhat extensively from a previous article by him in "The World's Work" are due to the editor and publisher of that magazine, and also to Mr. Arthur Bouchier for the kindly welcome he has been good enough to give the book.

# THE DRAMATIC AUTHOR'S COMPANION

## I

**General Principles.**—Undoubtedly the dramatist, like any other artist, poet, painter, or musician, is born and not made, but however gifted naturally, there is still something to be learnt before he can present his gifts to the public through the medium of a theatre. The musician, however perfect his ear and his own conception of harmony, has to employ external means to convey that conception to others, and technical mastery of those means requires nearly as much practice and hard work on the part of the born musician as it does on the part of one who may be greatly inferior in creative ability.

Experience extending over some years, and many hundreds of MSS., has shown the present writer that not one would-be dramatic author in five hundred has more than the merest bowing acquaintance with the instrument upon which he proposes to play, which is the stage. The object of this little book is to afford some help towards the mastery of that

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instrument. At the outset its writer labours under a difficulty from which the musician is comparatively free. The mechanics and capacities of musical instruments undergo very little change, with time; but nothing changes more rapidly and completely than the conditions, technical and æsthetic, of the theatre.

If an individual is not a born dramatist, he is not likely to become one in this life, and even if he is "born" a great deal will have to be done before he can be accepted as the completed article. In these circumstances perhaps the first thing he should find out is whether he really is the born dramatist or not, and the simplest way to do this is to put himself through a frank self-examination.

"Why do I want to write a play at all? Do my thoughts run naturally in that direction? Am I attracted by an innate love for the drama, and dramatic expression, or am I merely dazzled by the glare of those enormous rewards which, I am told, fall to the lot of the successful playwright?"

If he can honestly answer: "I am prone to think in action; I wish to make people move and talk: I would rather earn my living in that way than in any other, on account not of the size of the living, but of its nature"—then he may fairly hope playwriting to be his work, and if he will only supplement his natural bent by mastering the objective side of the calling, he may in time work up to success.

6 The next thing to be considered is the equipment of the dramatist. The variety and complexity of the demands made upon him are not small. To be a good dramatist, it seems to be necessary to be wary, yet spontaneous; broad, yet narrow; sympathetic, yet remorseless. The dramatist has to combine a subjective with an objective imagination. He has to make things appear natural under thoroughly artificial conditions. He has to cultivate a keen sense of humour and a clear sense of proportion, and to violate both, on occasion! To get at the hearts of his audience, he must be sympathetic, and responsive to every impulse of the human heart, and at the same time must have enough callous courage to be able to dissect human nature and expose its most intimate anatomy for all the world to see.

7 The dramatic author is Jailer, Executioner and Chief Tormentor on the one hand, whilst on the other he is the obliging surgeon who keeps his hand on the patient's pulse and salves his wounds when he has had as much as he can bear. Some dramatists fill only half of these rôles, and are solely destructive, but I take it the complete artist is he who, if he takes with the one hand, gives with the other and justifies his analysis by a pervading constructive idea.

8 In addition to psychological and moral insight, no little technical knowledge is necessary. By this I



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mean not only an acquaintance with the mechanical capacities of a theatre, but the ability to distinguish between dramatic and undramatic incident, effect, or dialogue; to be able to translate instantaneously what you write and what you read into action, and form a correct judgment of its dramatic effect. Those who are not born with this instinctive faculty must acquire it before they can become even moderately successful dramatists.

Typical instances of the possession and lack of this faculty are to be found in the plays of Lord Lytton and Lord Tennyson. The two best known plays of the former, *The Lady of Lyons* and *Money* have no pretensions to literary merit, and are remarkably dull reading, yet on the stage they are interesting and vivid, and have great dramatic value, as has been proved by their success. On reading them one would say that the author evidently was not thinking so much of what the characters were saying as of what they were doing; he thought in action, and action brings out the value of the plays. On the other hand, in *The Cup* and *The Falcon*, though they both have great literary merit, are beautiful pieces of writing, and a pleasure to read; on the stage they are uninteresting and undramatic, and in the case of *The Falcon* even ridiculous. A careful study of the play will show why this is so. The story is that of a poor nobleman to whom a surprise visit is paid by his wealthy, but haughty, lady-love. This

lady is a widow and her object in visiting the nobleman is to crave a boon. She has an only son who is lying ill, and has expressed a wish for a beautiful falcon, the one remnant of his nobility remaining to the nobleman! Will he give it to her, for her son? Alas! in his anxiety to do justice to his guest, and his larder being empty, the poor nobleman has dished up the unfortunate bird! This is the dramatic situation, and we are not informed of it until it is over!

10 And if things are not weak enough already they are made still more so by the fact that the lady has been too anxious and the gentleman too heartbroken to eat the bird! Had the audience been in the know all this time, the scene might have had a certain comic value, but as it is there is not a single dramatic incident in it, excepting, perhaps, a mild one at the end where the effect of the disclosure is to soften the lady's heart and cause her to fall on the gentleman's neck. It is just the kind of fanciful story that makes a pretty poem or even a pretty picture, but has no dramatic value at all and will not stand clothing in flesh and blood. By the time he wrote *Becket* Tennyson had become more familiar with the stage and showed some improvement, but the present writer has himself heard Sir Henry Irving speak of the great difficulties that had to be overcome in making that play fit for production, and in getting the poet to see why it wasn't! There is no clearer



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instance in literature of genius in one direction and inability in another in the same person.

- //. The dramatist must see in action, the audience must see action, and even when that is not actually taking place should see that events must inevitably lead up to it.

## II

HAVING outlined the equipment needed by the dramatist and the demands to be made upon him, let us now endeavour to ascertain how the former is best to be acquired. Assuming that the would-be dramatist is at present clothed only in the flimsy garment of his love for the drama, where is he to get the rest of his outfit? Just as a painter learns most in the life school, so will the dramatist. He may study the old masters, Euripides, Sophocles, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe, never forgetting Aristotle; he may study modern masters, Ibsen, Sudermann, Shaw, Barrie, Barker, Galsworthy, Pinero; he may even go to see So-and-So's plays in order to find out what to avoid; but his chief inspiration will be drawn from the living model, and upon the work done in the life class will his ultimate success be built up. The dramatic life class has one great advantage, there is no difficulty in gaining admission! But it also has a disadvantage, in that the model is heavily draped, and the dramatist will have to see as clearly through the drapery as if it were of glass if he is to write a play that will live. The

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insight required to do this, instinctive though it may be in the first place, can be greatly developed if not actually acquired. The best way to do this appears, to the present writer, to be to get early into the habit of looking at people from different points of view. It is astonishing how interesting the most commonplace person becomes when completely seen, and how rapidly we become reconciled to "fools" and "bores" when we know enough about them. Herein lies the secret of the charm exercised by fiction. People in novels are fascinating because we know all about them. We are admitted to their secrets. We are allowed to see their machinery at work, and feel like a schoolboy in the engine-room of a Cunarder. No man is a fool when he is after what he really wants, and his motives and methods are a source of never-failing interest to all interested in human nature. A sense of humour, proportion, sympathy can all be acquired by forgetting one's own in another's point of view. To get outside oneself is necessary. The gift for Comedy has been well defined as the ability to look at one's troubles and failings as though they were some one else's! The would-be dramatist must get early into the habit of walking round his object. The mind of an artist resembles a photographic plate, recording impressions which are not known to be there until developed, the developer being the need to cover a blank sheet of paper with the words and actions of believable



human beings. The dramatic actor should acquire the habit of looking himself straight in the face, even of what is called morbid introspection. He will thus get to know one human being fairly well. He will draw one model correctly, which will improve his drawing all along the line. It may, of course, be pleasanter to begin on some one else, but, however begun, this frank, unflinching study of a complete human personality is the simplest way to arrive at the knowledge required, at what we may call the psychological qualifications of the playwright. There is no royal road. For those who are not born Fieldings or Balzacs, knowledge of human nature is only to be gained by long, and, above all, by unbiassed, study. Technical qualifications are more easily come by. The first is what is known as the "sense of the theatre." By that is not meant a sense of "theatrical effect" in the showy, artificial sense, but the ability to imagine and organize dramatic pictures in such a fashion that the theatre will be the best place in which to display them. To acquire this sense it seems essential that the dramatist should be in the habit of frequenting the theatre, either "in front" or "behind." Nearly all great dramatists have either been actors or friends of actors, spending a great deal of time in the green-room, or persistent playgoers. I do not think a good play was ever turned out of a retired country parsonage! The would-be playwright would be

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well advised to live near some large town, where opportunities are frequent of seeing all sorts and conditions of plays. Better still, he might get some small job as an actor, extra gentleman or "general utility" in a theatre. Here, if he keeps his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut, and is sufficiently modest in his claims on the management, he will soon learn so much about the stage and its capabilities that when he at last sends in a MS. to his manager, that manager's reader will breathe a sigh of relief, and hope, before he has read half a page! "This man knows his trade" is a spur to any one who has had to wade through thousands of ill-constructed scenes on the chance of finding a promising idea.

It must not be forgotten, however, that, unlike many other works of art, a play *must* appeal to a large mixed audience. One patron is enough for a picture, but, speaking roughly, a play which cannot draw twenty thousand people into a theatre in three weeks, will not pay its expenses, to say nothing of profit. It follows, therefore, that the would-be dramatist should not do all his learning "behind." If he does, his efforts as a playwright will be in danger of pleasing only his brother actors. He should see as many plays from "the front" as possible. He should attend rehearsals whenever he can. He should watch and appreciate the reasons for rejecting this line or this piece of business, and accepting that.



Stepping down, for a moment, to a lower level, this living in and out of theatres is practically the only way in which a dramatist can keep himself abreast of the times in those matters of fashion which play as big a part in the theatre as elsewhere. People do not expect to find soliloquies, asides, comic servants, and the like in plays now-a-days, any more than they look for bustles and crinolines in the park. A far-seeing playwright may be ahead of his time, and set the fashion, just as "Jay's" or "Paquin's" do; but he has to be familiar with the present before he can engineer the future.



### III

**Modern Theatrical Conditions.**—Before setting pen to paper, the dramatist should acquaint himself thoroughly with modern theatrical conditions, mechanical as well as artistic. To begin by doing this will save him a great deal of trouble later on.

**Mechanical Conditions.**—The chief broad characteristic of the modern theatre is that it is a picture theatre, the audience looking on from without. In old times the play went on practically in the midst of the audience, which became, to a certain extent, part and parcel of the performance. The give and take between audience and actors was an important factor, and one to be reckoned with by the playwright. In our day the audience is entirely receptive. The actor is supposed to be unaware of its presence. To become obviously conscious of it for a single moment is to step outside the picture, and is only permissible in the least serious stamp of performance. One of the points of this system is the increased opportunity it affords for scenic effect and realistic presentation. Whether this is a good thing or not is a matter of opinion, but it is one of the

conditions of the times, and has to be reckoned with. The mechanical resources of a theatre are now-a-days so rich that practically any illusion can be produced, from a shooting star to an earthquake. Consequently the dramatist may present his characters under almost any conditions and in almost any situation. The only purely mechanical limitation that concerns him has to do with the sequence and arrangement of his scenes. This requires careful consideration. Space, in London at any rate, is limited, and scene-shifters are, at present, human. It would not do to have an act in three scenes, the first of which was on the deck of the *Victory* at Trafalgar, the second at the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of Waterloo, and the third in the Guildhall, London! Yet that identical arrangement has come under the notice of the present writer as a reader! Even Drury Lane could not manage such a succession of scenes without pauses long enough for *entr'actes*. To give an instance of the points which the playwright should bear in mind: When two scenes, one of which is a big set, occur in the same act, the smaller must be played first, either in a small chamber, set within a larger scene, or in front of a backcloth, and this should not be a very quiet, impressive scene, for noises at the back are bound to be made. A hint may be taken from the pantomimes, where it will be noticed that the loud-voiced funny man, or knock-about comedians,



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generally find their opportunity on such occasions ! Architectural considerations, too, must not be neglected. In constructing a play the dramatist must keep the scene in his mind's eye, and not bring his characters in an out of doors that do not exist, or obviously lead into the sky, though perhaps this last consideration is one more for the stage-manager or producer. In this connection an architect once told the present writer that to his expert observation the average room reproduced on the stage could not possibly exist anywhere else. Perhaps this is a point that does not signify very much, few of us being experts in such matters, but in an age when accuracy of representation is aimed at so much it seems a pity that every one should not be satisfied.

On the other hand, too much accuracy in one direction will react upon itself in another. It is quite impossible, for instance, to reproduce battles, with any conviction, on the modern stage. In Shakespeare's time, when so much was left to the imagination, they played a large part, but now that we are shown practically everything, it is impossible to make anything much beyond a duel convincing. You are "up against" one of the limitations of art. Attempts have been made to reproduce great battle scenes, notably in *King John* and other Shakespearean plays at His Majesty's, by what are known as moving tableaux, but they are quite unconvincing, and if anything, detract from the total production. Even

in *Macbeth*, where the great fight between Macbeth and Macduff is the culminating point of the play, they "exeunt fighting," and the climax occurs behind. May that not be because Shakespeare realized how impossible it would be to reproduce such a grisly thing as a combat in that wild-beast age, and so left it to the imagination, which knows no limitation? The Greek dramatists adopted the same tactics. Euripides, for instance, adopts them with Heracles and Death in the *Alceste*. Of course the Macbeth and Macduff fight has been perpetrated many times in full view of the audience. On the one occasion when I saw it played thus, the sword, dagger and axe fight, though admirably done, was hardly convincing. When Macbeth fell dead, the heaving of his chest and body after his exertions went far to dispel the delusion that a battle-axe in the brain is promptly fatal! Whenever possible, all action should go on in full view of the audience, at the present time, but the dramatist must frankly accept the material and mechanical limitation of his art. In making use of crowds, for instance, he must be careful not to put them into a scene which will expose their scantiness. Imagine a scene showing a Royal Garden-party at Windsor Castle. A crowd is supposed to be present, but the scene-painter has backed it with an extensive view of the Castle and grounds. In the foreground the crowd moves about, but the background is empty, and you will only get



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into a worse difficulty if you attempt to fill it with painted figures. In anything but a play which is obviously spectacular, such scenes should be avoided. If you must have a crowd, care should be taken to put it into a room or a street, where it can be naturally and simply bounded.

Don't forget that actors and actresses are human, so that if they have to leave the scene in one garment and come back in another, give them time to change. Servants, too, should be given time to hear the bell and come up-stairs before they answer it. "Gives money" is a bad stage direction. People, as a rule, look at their money, count it, and say something à propos before they hand it over. A scene in *Becket*, as played by Irving, was spoilt by allowing a page to leave his master, reluctantly, without a word or a backward glance. Large dinner parties are awkward to manage, although it has been done, and done successfully. Elaborate scenery and many changes are expensive, a large cast still more so. These are not insurmountable obstacles, but they materially increase the cost of production and the risk, and so the play itself will have to be proportionately good to induce managers to put it on. The notion that scenic effects will bolster up a bad play has been proved again and again to be erroneous. The present writer once had a very bad play to read in which the author pointed out in his covering letter that considering where the scenes were laid (Waterloo,

Trafalgar, etc.) the play would be sure of success on patriotic grounds alone! No play was ever very successful on any but dramatic grounds.

Perhaps it is scarcely necessary to point out that animals are not, as a rule, good *dramatis personæ*. Stage dogs are liable to wag their tails at the wrong moment. Horses look very ill at ease! A play is now going the rounds of the theatres, in MS., in which a highly trained elephant plays an important part. It is not likely to be produced, at any rate in its present form. Either play or elephant will have to be "cut"!

These are but a few of the *mechanical* conditions involved, but perhaps enough has been said to show the dramatist that he must familiarize himself with them before he starts writing his play.

**Period and Place.**—These two considerations may be said to come under the heading of "conditions." An oft-repeated assertion in theatredom is that "costume spells ruin"; and no doubt a failure in "costume" is more disastrous, because vastly more expensive, than a failure in "present day"; but does the "costume" help to make the failure? *Ceteris paribus*, are people less likely to come to a play dealing with past manners than to one reflecting themselves and their own fashions? It is not an easy question to answer, but, on the whole, I fancy that the human interest of a play is so enormously more important than any extraneous consideration

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that costume is of very slight moment. A good play may be helped to some little extent by pretty costumes, but no amount of fine dressing will save an uninteresting play. On the other hand, overdressing has gone far to upset a good one. I can remember more than one instance of a good scene being absolutely drowned in the costume, until it produced no effect at all! The dramatist, so far as it lies with him, should, in short, realize that the dressing of his *personæ* is part of the picture he is building up, and must be in exact proportion to the whole.

In choosing a period, there are other considerations, however, besides costumes. The author must either choose one he knows all about, or one that his future audience is likely to know nothing about! If an author thinks he can make a play interesting which deals with the ancient Mexicans, or even with the Carthaginians, he is not likely to get into difficulties with his audience through mistakes in his archæology. But he handicaps himself enormously in his race for their approval. The one thing which is of perennial interest in the theatre is the working of human nature. It is not too much to say that the most ingenious conceits, the cleverest mechanical contrivances, the most amazing surprises, only work through the light they throw on men and women. The whole question of period, in short, with which those of costume and place are inseparably wrapped

up, may be put thus : Shall I add to, or take from, the human interest of my play by my proposed time and place? Are they necessary to my plot, and, if not, do they help or hinder? It follows from what has already been said, that the would-be dramatist must familiarize himself with all the local colour of the life he means to portray, just as he must learn all the stage conditions. He must keep his imagination alive, and realize that, like most men, he probably fancies he knows many things, at which in reality he only makes a guess. The assurance with which writers set out to describe a life they have never seen is amazing. People whose only knowledge of kings and queens is a glimpse of them, occasionally, in a landau, surrounded by soldiers, will bring them gaily on the boards, to behave like lunatics!

It is quite a common thing to find plays about the West End written by denizens of the East, and vice versa. Of course a great dramatist may cover all the ground, and live at both ends of the street at once, but, on the whole, it is the safest way to assume that your knowledge of any life you have not lived will have gaps in it, which the critics, and your dear friends, will joyfully spot. If your plot demands an incursion into strange places, take pains to get such facts as you wish to use right. You do not need to know everything: that would take too long: but what you do know must be dexterously used! That



is where the artist comes in! That is what gives Shakespeare the reputation of knowing everything! Kipling can bring a torpedo boat quite safely into a novel; it is doubtful whether he could bring it with equal safety into port!

Facts seem to justify the belief that the most popular *locus in quo* for a play is *here*, and the most popular time *now*. After that, a big jump has to be taken to the last century or before it. "Yesterday" is dangerous, and "to-morrow" is not half so popular on the stage as off it! But, again, it must be remembered that these remarks have to be taken with a qualification. If the play is good enough, the place may be the moon, and the time a thousand years hence!

In writing of strange places, times, and customs, it must be borne in mind that only surface differences are popular. In its depths the plot must deal with such human nature and human interests as we know. The machinery of *Peter Pan* may be supernatural, but the passions which give it a *raison d'être* are those of you and me.

To sum up the whole question as shortly as possible, the main situation must be one that is thoroughly appreciable by a mixed audience of the present day, a situation governed by universal and permanent, not evanescent or purely local conditions.

#### IV

**Types of Plays.**—Speaking broadly, plays are divided into the two classes of Tragedy and Comedy, with a further subdivision into melodrama, farce, musical comedy, pantomime, etc. It may be well to sketch the leading characteristics of each type.

**Tragedy.**—Real tragedy seems to consist in the failure of any human being to be the master of his own destiny, in his inability to discern, when two roads seem to lie open, that which will lead him to the greater happiness. In the great tragedies of the world this is apt to be complicated by a character easily played upon by villains and self-seekers, rising, with greatest writers of all, into the poignant form of the tragedy in which a man or woman's misfortunes are the result of his or her noblest characteristics. Superficially, tragedy is characterized by a sense of fate, of what the oriental means by *Kismet*. The persons seem carried on to the catastrophe by some power stronger than themselves, as a man is carried by rapids to a cataract. The tragic writer must get this atmosphere into his work, if his play is to be effective.



**Comedy.**—As for comedy, it has been defined, or rather described, at some length by George Meredith, and it would be presumption in me to go over the same ground. Without attempting to go too deeply into the question, I may say that comedy deals with the lighter and more every-day emotions, or with emotions in their lighter and more accustomed aspects. Love, in comedy, may be deep enough, but it should not be mixed with those ingredients—jealousy, revenge, intensity of hatred—which make it a source of misery rather than of bliss and hope. The plot must, of course, work out to a happy conclusion, not only because audiences love happy endings, but for more artistic and more logical reasons. A happy ending is more consistent with the light and happy treatment of the whole affair than a sad one—again, from the logical standpoint, what better justification for the telling of a story can there be than the fact that, although difficulties and complications have to be encountered, the desired conclusion is reached at last? Stories are not always told because they are true, but often because they are unusual, unexpected, surprising. A play should both make a tangle and unravel it. The tragedian unravels it with the sword, or the cup of cold poison: the comedian with his dexterous fingers and a laugh.

**Melodrama and Farce.**—Speaking broadly, again, these are merely exaggerations of Tragedy and Comedy. In melodrama the tragic machinery is

used coarsely and baldly, appealing to less subtle and cultivated intelligences than tragedy proper. In farce a similar exaggeration takes place, but in the opposite direction, the lightness of comedy being pushed into an irresponsible extreme which calls for no acknowledgment but a bounding diaphragm !

**Musical Comedy, Pantomime, etc.**—These forms of "art" defy definition. There is no reason why, in the hands of a true artist, they should not be as artistic as any other form of drama. But their freedom from all control except that of their own pattern makes it futile to attempt analysis, yet there are certain points to be noticed which we will discuss later.

To go a little more discursively into these different kind of plays—

**Tragedy.**—Tragedy lives on the various situations created by the existence of a great love among the destructive passions of hatred, jealousy, revenge. Tragedy rushes : it desires to reach its goal as quickly as possible. Its characters are strongly marked, heady people, often combining great ability with superstition. It is unpopular to-day not so much, I think, because it is tragic, and shows us blood where we prefer to see smiles, as because it is out of harmony with our modern life. In the days of Marlowe and Shakespeare people lived among tragedies. The courtiers who applauded at the Globe Theatre with their heads left on their shoulders



by sufferance of the king or queen, had all felt the terrors portrayed, had all lived in that atmosphere of danger which is the atmosphere of the tragic writer. Like modern audiences they were attracted by the familiar. With most of us the only known tragedies are the peaceful deaths of those we love, and the loom of our own in the future. After its strangeness, the most potent factor in the unpopularity of tragedy is the comparative incapacity of the tragic actor. The actor is as strange in portraying tragic emotions as his audience is in appreciating them. A modern man or woman may easily pass through life without ever feeling the emotion of great fear, or seeing it felt by others. It may be as far outside the pictures of life he mentally elaborates as the feelings of a Martian! The English dramatist must lay his account, moreover, with the undeniable fact that the English character unfits an audience, to a very considerable extent, for looking on at tragedy. We are called sentimental, and if to like agreeable emotions and to shrink from disagreeable ones be sentimental, the accusation is justified. Whether this be a fault or a virtue might bear discussion, but the main thing for the playwright is the fact itself. Until he has proved himself to be an artist of unusual power, he had better leave tragedy alone. Many of these remarks apply to drama in verse, even when it is not tragic. As a form of art in which the artificiality is on the surface, and obvious, it has to contend with that

dislike for the unfamiliar which is united, in every mixed audience, with a love of certain kinds of novelty. The man who believes himself endowed with the power to write poetic drama had better follow the example of Mr. Thomas Hardy, ignoring the stage and looking to the cultivated reader for his audience. No doubt there have been plenty of exceptions, but they have not been found among those who need advice as to how to get their work upon the "boards" !

**Comedy.**—I. The question of Comedy has been perhaps needlessly complicated by the intrusion of the purely literary critic into a field which is not his own. All drama must depend mainly on action. To comply with the essential conditions of the theatre the dramatist must think, not in words, but in doings. The ideal way to conceive a play would be to build it up in the mind entirely as action, including in that term those spoken words which themselves constitute action. Upon the developed scenario thus formed the necessary dialogue might then be imposed, until the whole was complete. It is clear that such a method of proceeding does not lend itself to the satisfaction of the critic who demands that a play shall be first of all literary, that its dialogue shall charm the educated taste when read by the study fire. A writer of complete genius and judgment, who could hold all the threads, both of warp and woof, in his hands and keep them in accurate balance, could no



doubt produce a play in which the dramatic and literary qualities were equally fine and in perfect proportion to each other. Such a genius, however, has yet to be born. The task was too much even for Shakespeare.

**Literary Drama.**—Literary folk are inclined to protest against the small measure of support accorded to the plays of Tennyson, Meredith, Henley and Stevenson, Mr. Henry James and others, but their attitude does not bear examination. In a novel or an essay style may be everything and may constitute, in itself, a good reason for writing. It is the special and distinctive excellence of the printed word, and so has a perfect right to take command of the situation. It is not so with a play. There the precedence belongs to action, and words have to be subordinated to it. In those plays by Henley and Stevenson, Meredith and James, charming though they were in many respects, the characters very seldom, if ever, opened their mouths without destroying the illusion. The literary style sat on them all like a uniform. While on the subject of literary and poetical plays I should like to point out that those who write them, especially the blank verse ones, invariably choose some historical subject that requires most elaborate scenery and dressing and an enormous cast to do it justice, and consequently the cost of production can only be repaid by a huge popular success. Blank verse is, and probably always has been, "caviare to the

general." Of course Shakespeare went in for large casts and elaborate scenery, but as one man in his time played so many parts and the scenery was left to the imagination, the cost of production was not so heavy. Poets who wish to write plays and see them produced would do well to study the work and methods of Mr. W. B. Yeats of the Irish National Theatre Society.

**Comedy.**—II. The term Comedy has now become very elastic and comprehensive. Originally Tragedy and Comedy represented two extremes. Now-a-days Tragedy represents one extreme and Comedy all the rest. The comedian has to be familiar with every possible phase of life, with every complication of events which is not absolutely tragic. The principal qualification of a comedy-writer is a sense of humour; an ability to look at life from outside, untouched by its sorrows and joys, yet fully appreciating and even sympathizing with the meaning and value of any situation to those who are in it. The comedian is master of a situation, the tragedian may be described as its slave. Both are controlled, of course, by the spirit of the creation at which they aim, but the comedian has his elbows much freer than the tragedian. A sense of congruity is not such a straight waistcoat as a sense of fate! Comedy has a wide range. It may be grim or gay, optimistic or pessimistic, simple or ironical. It may be a comedy of limb action or one of word action. Fine comedies have been written in which



the action is almost exclusively word action. *Le monde où l'on s'ennuie* for instance—that is, nearly all talk, but the talk is action. Bernard Shaw's *Getting Married* is the same.

Everything said modifies the situation, and carries it on to its conclusion.

Comedy of character may be subjective or objective. You may laugh with a character or at him. One laughs at Malvolio, but with Falstaff; at any rate, when he is telling his adventures with the men in buckram!

A good comedian presents his characters in two lights, that in which they wish to stand, and that in which they really do stand, and the audience will always be alive to the difference.

The humour of comedy proper must be unstrained and natural, more natural than the humour one generally meets in life. We saw recently a delightful instance of natural, unforced humour in Rudolf Bésier's *Don*, in which the comedy of contrasting characters was deliciously managed. A colonel, whose stern, well-drilled opinions were part of his uniform, was contrasted with a mild, lamb-like parson, with neither backbone nor views, whose life had been lived in a country parsonage, a sort of half-way house between earth and heaven. In both men the original material could be distinguished from the embroidery laid upon it by training.

Says the colonel's wife: "All men are coarse at heart, and lead coarse lives!" "Indeed!" says the parson's wife, "I have not found it so!" The audience looks from one to the other, and laughter beginning with a gentle ripple swells quickly into a heavy breaker. Delightful, too, when well managed, is comedy of the inevitable order, when the joke is seen coming on like a tidal wave, which nothing can stop, until it passes, leaving a froth of laughter in its wake. Such a situation occurs in Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*. A young lady is, really married, supposed to be the mother of an illegitimate child; all are severe and accusing except one person, who from her nature would be expected to be the hardest judge of all. She is winning golden opinions for a sympathetic attitude which causes wonder and speculation until "Oh! Anne knew" bursts from the surreptitious wife and mother! The one obvious reason that alone could have such an effect upon Anne is entirely overlooked by the rest of the family, who would rather think well of the guileful than miss the chance of a thrust at the guileless!

Comedy of plot, too, must be natural, and not far-fetched, consisting as it generally does of the attempts to meet on more or less common grounds of a curious assortment of characters brought together by force of accidental circumstances. In the play I have already quoted, there was just such a situation, by some curious accident of birth, or heredity, or some-



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thing, a son born to a good couple of the type they could *never* understand !

Comedy of dialogue does not merely mean witticisms on the part of the characters, but the contrasting points of view, and the endless possibilities of misinterpretation, ambiguities, and so on, all help to make it up.

A very primitive and popular form of the comedy of contrast seems to be the elephantine wife and diminutive husband, but the more subtle form lies in the contrast between what the characters of a play really are, and what they are anxious to appear to be. The comedy in the above quoted instance from *Don* lies not only in the contrast between the two husbands, but also in the fact of each wife seeing in her own husband the representative of mankind in general !

From all this it will be seen that comedy is, on the whole, more psychological than tragedy, and where the latter deals with extremes the former deals with the happy medium. A tragedian may be as serious as he likes, but a comedian must not take himself too seriously. A comedian has many advantages and an infinite variety of fields. He may venture where no one else is allowed to tread. His fun is a protective armour which allows him to attack an opponent and then clear out before the laughter dies away. However much abused behind his back, he is seldom attacked to his face, the other fellow is

too busy laughing. In fact, like the old-time jester, he may do whatever he likes, so long as he's sufficiently funny!

The star of comedy is, at the present time, very much in the ascendant in the British drama. I doubt if the somewhat ponderous humour of modern German comedy, the effervescence of the French, are to be compared with the fiercely entertaining comedy of Shaw, the subtle flavour of Barrie, or the mordant satire of Barker and Galsworthy, to say nothing of the clean, sparkling fun of Somerset Maugham and Hubert Henry Davies. It is the fashion when comedies like the *Rivals* or *She Stoops to Conquer* are revived to say that we have nothing so good now-a-days, but their fun is surely sorry, bald stuff compared to some of the modern humour, and in a modern play would be considered very broad farce. It represents the summit of art of a certain period, and it is as interesting to look at as the *Puffing Billy* in the museum, but, like him, we would find it too slow for our needs to-day. The humour of Bob Acres and Mrs. Malaprop, admirable though it is, is surely not in the same class as the delicate, rich humour of *What Every Woman Knows*, *John Bull's Other Island*, or Lady Gregory's *Hyacinth Halvey*.

The humorist must take a dozen looks around him and ahead of him for one behind. Nothing ages or gets stale so quickly as humour. Jokes do not live



long and will not often bear repetition, though the recollection of their first appearance is often very pleasing. The comedian must realize that his line of business requires, probably, a more exact journalistic knowledge of the needs of the moment than any other in the playwriting department.

**Farce.**—Farce is a term given to the broadest comedy, the blatant absurdity, and yet there is such a thing as a convincing farce. Like everything else good farce should be simple, not complicated. The composition of a good farce seems to be somewhat as follows: an absurd mistake is made, or situation caused, it may be as ridiculous, improbable, far-fetched as you like, but there the straining should cease. The situations that follow should be the natural, inevitable, and logical result of the initial absurdity. That much may be granted, but no more. In the evergreen *Charley's Aunt*, an admirable farce, which probably all the readers of this book have seen, granting the main situation, that Lord Fancourt Babberley could for one moment be mistaken for an old lady of wealthy connections, the events that follow are perfectly natural and convincing. This is surely the essence of good farce. Bad farces depend not on one far-fetched idea, but on a succession of the wildest coincidences and improbable situations. I remember seeing one once in which a lunatic whose custom was to go about dressed in a blanket, with feathers in his hair, and imagine himself an Indian

Chief, happened to have escaped from the asylum and be roaming about at large, just at the time that there was a real Indian Chief in the neighbourhood. Of course they met, a funny enough situation, but as it was but one of the many such happenings, it is obvious what wretched, concocted stuff the play was, which, though it attained a fair measure of success at the time, is now dead and buried, whilst *Charley's Aunt* is still running! Not long ago the present writer paid her a visit, and it struck him that though the old lady was just as funny as ever, she was a little less convincing, not so much on account of her character and situation, as of her dress! The play has become old-fashioned in construction. There are soliloquies and asides, and it is helped forwards by methods that are too obvious for the present generation. It is as though the old lady were amongst us dressed in old-fashioned clothes, an unconvincing situation for a woman, even if she hails from Brazil, which at once arouses our suspicions. I believe that if she were re-dressed in the garments of modern construction, and again presented to the public, *Charley's Aunt* would have nearly as great a success as she did at her debut. Perhaps the most successful farce of recent years is Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*, the popularity of which is, in itself, a proof of the improvement in public taste in this direction.

**Melodrama.**—Melodrama stands quite apart, in a class by itself. It has its own audiences, its own



theatres, and its own authors, who, as a rule, cannot do anything else. It has been defined as "bad drama," but perhaps "primitive drama" would be a fairer definition. The method of the melodramatist is, as a rule, the seductive and popular one of contrasting the virtues of one set of people with the vices of another. The ingredients of a melodrama are sensationalism and variety, virtue and vice. Of the last two, care must be taken that the former is triumphant and the latter defeated, and this is generally quoted as the justification for this type of play. But woe betide the melodramatist who attempts to deal humanly with his subject, or make any of his characters bear any real resemblance to life! His villain must be an utter blackguard, with no white spots, his hero a saint with no black ones, and the same with all the other characters! Custom has ordained certain well-defined rules which are apparently as unalterable as those of the Medes and Persians. The comic man must invariably run the villain to earth, the comic woman do the same to the comic man! The villain must always be round the corner when the hero is on the stage, the same with the villainess and heroine. Comic man and woman a buffer state between the two. Scenes must change with bewildering rapidity, but care must be taken, as pointed out in the section on mechanical conditions, in the arrangement of them. Small set inside the greater, front-cloth scenes between two big sets, such

scenes to be played noisily to drown the sounds at the back! When transplanting your characters from one part of the world to another, none must on any account be left behind, though it is always popular to let the comic woman have a very narrow squeak, boarding the train or boat at the last moment, laden with various domestic impedimenta. The rules of construction of a melodrama are as simple, and as imperative, as those of pantomime. Bring your characters on when, where, and how you like, but bring them all on. Your villain must end up in gaol, your hero and heroine at the altar, and your "comics" beside the twin's bassinette! Ethics, not art, governs melodrama, the simple ethics—those of the "right's right and wrong's wrong" order! Every single member of your audience will probably leave the theatre feeling a better man or woman. The greatest villain among them will feel he is not so bad as "that chap." On the other hand, there is always the danger that the pious ones may be overcome by their goodness, as objectively revealed to them, and do something foolish.

As has been said above, "primitive drama" seems to be a fair definition of melodrama. To write it requires a primitive knowledge of art, humour, and ethics. It is true one must begin somewhere, but melodrama is surely the wrong end. At any rate, it does not appear to lead anywhere else, and its popularity seems to be on the wane. I know of at



least one once-famous melodramatist whose pen is lying idle, waiting, as he says, for the return of the good old melodrama. He might as well wait for the return of the good old mastodon !

**Pantomimes and Children's Plays.**—Like Melodrama, the old-fashioned Pantomime too has disappeared and is replaced by something quite different. Many regret the change, but it is regret of the respectful order generally paid to things that have had their day, and ends there. Were the old-fashioned pantomime reproduced it is doubtful if the grumblers would support it. Perhaps this is partly due to the disappearance of some of the famous actors on the scene. The late Dan Leno was the beau ideal of the pantomime artist, and since his death pantomime itself seems to have been in a poor state of health. Rising out of the ashes—composed at present of scenic effect, hotch-potch of musical comedy, individual music-hall turns by clever but disagreeable comedians, often too selfish and jealous to work harmoniously together for the general good—is the beautiful phoenix of such children's plays as *Peter Pan*, *The Blue Bird*, *Pinkie and the Fairies*, and others, rapidly becoming too numerous to mention. No sign of the dramatic times is more hopeful than the present outlook for children's plays. The pioneers in this line of play seem to have been Mr. Arthur Bouchier with *Shock-headed Peter* at the Garrick Theatre, and Mr.

Seymour Hicks with *Alice in Wonderland* and *Blue Bell*. This has culminated in *Peter Pan*, an ideal children's play. It really represents a child's day-dream, and children live in their day-dreams, the so-called facts of life—having to have their faces washed, put on clean pinnies and all the rest of it—being mere interruptions! And yet even the children's play at the present time seems to be tending towards realism. The, even to a child, impossible fairy-land of the imagination is giving place to the possible fairy-land at home, hinted at in Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*. In place of the fairy queen formerly enacted by a well-preserved and supported damsel of fifty, we have the twinkling feet of little Elsie Craven, a genuine fairy! The management for which I have the honour to read has long made a speciality of children's plays. I can speak from long experience of the commoner faults into which playwrights of this order are in the habit of falling.

The first and commonest of all, is that of preaching. Ninety-nine out of every hundred children's plays have a horrible ogre striding through their pages, incidentally quite taking the wind out of the sails of the legitimate ogre of the play. This ogre is called "Moral"! And the way the poor wretch is watched! He is never left to himself for a single moment. Just as the child is beginning to enjoy the situation, its attention is drawn to this beast



lurking in the background, and its pleasure is spoilt, just as it would be were it told to remember its clean pinafore in the midst of an exciting game! Children dislike being preached at, and are quite competent to appreciate the moral that exists almost unconsciously in such plays as *The Blue Bird* or *Peter Pan*. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Pinkie* have practically no morals and have no need of them, nor have children. The attitude which writes a preachy-preachy children's play is much the same as that which sends the poor little mites to see a Shakespeare, but does not go itself! Children are very quick to detect insincerity and would revolt from some of the plays which I have read. Do not be for ever trying to instil nice ideas into children, take it for granted they are already there; then the children will like you and your play.

The writer of children's plays has a great field before him, but it is not such easy going as it looks. He must be wise and not let his fancy outrun certain practical considerations. The kingdoms at the back of the North wind or the other side of the moon may be beautiful but they are probably very expensive to reproduce, so it would not do to have *too* much of them. When using some familiar nursery tale or rhyme as your theme remember that children are very conservative and apt to resent innovations. Think of the little ones that have got to learn and

speak the dialogue you would write. Make it simple and easily learnt, cut it up nicely into thin slices as you would if it were cake. Divide the plums evenly, make it plain and wholesome, not too much sugar and spice lest your audience should get indigestion, and do not give them too much! Music is generally considered a necessity in a children's play, therefore the composer's point of view will have to be considered. All these things must be borne in mind by those who write children's plays. And do not forget the grown-ups. Some of them went to *Peter Pan* twenty times, with a different little excuse every time!

**Burlesque and Musical Comedy.**—It is with Burlesque as it is with Pantomime—only more so. The once sacred Lamp seems almost to have burnt itself out, and has been succeeded by Musical Comedy, which in its turn appears to be giving place to the Musical Play, in which there is some kind of coherent plot. As I have said elsewhere in writing of this form of entertainment, it is difficult to lay down any definite rules, excepting the one that the audience must on no account be given time to think! It may also be noticed that however apparently silly and irresponsible such entertainments may appear it evidently requires more than one clever head to turn them out. "Too many cooks spoil the broth" does not apply to musical comedy! This is due to the fact that in spite of



the scoffs and sneers levelled at its head, it requires a large variety of attractions, all of which must be good if the entertainment is to "get there." The fun must be funny, the music pretty, the dialogue smart, and the lyrics bright and well turned. Very few people have facility in all these different things, therefore I should advise the tyro at this kind of work to begin, at any rate, by mastering one particular department. Many "books" for musical comedies have been through my hands, but not one displaying the ability of one person to do all the things required.

**Comic Opera.**—Comic Opera, at the present time, suffers from a severe handicap. Perfection in this form of art seems to have been reached in the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. They have set up a standard by which every comic opera has since been judged and come badly out of the ordeal. They are a national institution and there is little room for anything else. Some day another Gilbert and Sullivan may arise, perhaps combined in the one person, who will be a genius requiring no text books! One can but point to Sir William Gilbert's masterly construction and method as the best authority on how to do it. Simplicity and the ability to look at a thing from different points of view seem to be the key-notes. Sir William will take the most ordinary situation and look at it upside down. But it is only standing on its head, its

arms and legs are in the right place; however wild the fun, the sense of form and construction is retained throughout as in well-drawn caricatures. Nor is it mere buffoonery and tomfoolery. At the back of it all is the soundest practical common-sense, and it is this application of the most commonplace rules to outrageous situations that seems to constitute the great charm of Sir William's humour. To make the punishment fit the crime has always been the object of legislation. "The man who would woo a fair maid must apprentice himself to the trade" is surely the soundest common-sense. In most men's lives wooing must play a very important part, and much unhappiness is caused by folk knowing very little about it! Poor Jack Point in *The Yeomen of the Guard* furnishes a pathetic example for keeping one's business and private affairs separate! Perhaps this sound and kindly philosophy is a very great factor in the evergreen success of the plays, at any rate it points to the fact very much insisted on in this book, that life teems with plots for all kinds of plays, if the dramatist will only learn to look at things from different points of view!

**One-Act Plays.**—Fifty and more per cent. of the plays sent to a manager are one-acters! Why it is hard to say, unless it is due to a praiseworthy desire to begin modestly. But all those who are anxious to get their productions on the boards should realize that, whereas it is nearly as difficult



to write a good one-act play as it is a good three- or four-act one, it is very much harder to find a market for it. A good three- or four-acter which can fill the bill is nearly certain of production somewhere, but a curtain-raiser, as a rule, requires a specific occasion, and it may be a long time before that arises. However, the market is in a better condition that way than it was, and even whilst I write, a theatre entirely devoted to one-act plays is being mooted. The rules governing a one-act play are practically the same as those governing any other. It is only a case of a smaller picture. A one-act play is like an allopathic pill compressed into the size of a homœopathic one, or a comet without a tail! The tail is there all right, although you do not see it! In a one-act play the dramatist must get to work on the plot the moment the curtain is up; he has no time to wait about and build up situations, the situation must be there. The characters should be brought on at a moment in the state of mind when that characteristic essential to the situation is dominant; the whole thing must be dramatic and concentrated. J. M. Barrie's *Twelve-pound Look* is a fine example of the one-act play, so also are the little humble-life episodes of George Paston. Grim one-acters and plays of the very highest order are J. M. Synge's *Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*, plays dealing with peasant life in the West of Ireland, and Lady Gregory's deliciously

humorous comedies of Irish life and character. All these are easily procurable and may be studied with great advantage. Most managers look for something bizarre or out of the way in a one-act play, something that may cause a mild sensation and help draw people to the theatre. If you wish to see your play produced care must be taken to keep down the expenses in the matter of cast, scenery, etc., as managers do not like to risk much money on the production of one-act plays, which, as a rule, bring in very small returns.

**Sketches.**—From a financial point of view perhaps the most profitable form of one-act play is the music-hall sketch; large sums are paid for them, if they prove very popular. In this form of entertainment certain definite rules have to be observed, with regard to the length, number of characters, scenes, speaking parts, etc. For, strictly speaking, music-halls are not allowed to produce stage-plays, but a mutual understanding has been come to between the music-hall and theatre managers, by which the former may produce stage plays within certain limits. These rules will be found in the Appendix.

In writing sketches for the halls it must be remembered that music-hall audiences are not at all trained to the niceties of art, but require things put very plainly indeed before they can appreciate them. They come in, for the most part, for very little money, and expect a great deal in return for



it. They are less sophisticated than the theatre audiences, and are not accustomed to being ignored and will not be, therefore the soliloquy and aside are expected, and anything less obvious regarded as "jaw." At the same time, it must not be forgotten that as they get more used to sketches they will demand a higher standard.

**Adaptation and Translation.**—There are two methods of dealing with foreign plays, adaptation and translation. Strictly speaking, these two terms, in this connection at any rate, seem generally misapplied. In adaptation a foreign play is taken and transplanted boldly on to English soil, its characters anglicized, and by the time the process is finished practically a new play is turned out. In fact, it has been "translated" in the fullest sense of the word! In what is known as translation, situation, characters, locality, etc., remain the same, the language only is changed in order to render the play intelligible to strangers; in short, it is "adapted" to their needs. However, perhaps this is an unimportant matter, and in the present instance the terms will be employed as they usually are.

**Adaptation.**—For obvious reasons adaptation is by far the more difficult process, and generally the least satisfactory, but it has been done, and done very successfully, and there are instances where the adaptation has surpassed the original. *A Pair of Spectacles, A Scrap of Paper, The Private*

*Secretary* are all instances in which the original play gained in adaptation. Great care must, of course, be exercised in the selection of the play to be adapted. It would never do to choose a play depending for its situation upon characteristics peculiar to one nation, and then transplanting it to another. The present writer has read many adaptations in which it was obvious, before reading half-a-dozen pages, that Mr. Baker was really M. Boulanger or Herr Bäcker !

The subject of the play must be adaptable to different circumstances and surroundings and depend for its plot on a conglomeration of events, subject to conditions or conventions, which are, on the whole, universal ! A situation depending entirely on social conditions, and the laws governing them, of that particular country in which the play is placed, is scarcely likely to be appreciated by a sufficient number of people to repay production at a theatre depending upon the public for its support. A short while back a play was produced in London called *The New York Idea*. It was very funny and very clever, but its many funny situations were the result of the peculiarities of American divorce laws and their variations in the different States, consequently the play was unappreciable to a large section of the British public, and had to be withdrawn almost immediately. The same thing, in a greater or lesser degree, has occurred in many other productions,



German and French as well as American. *The Arm of the Law* at the Garrick, besides being a very grim tragedy, portrayed a situation which could not occur in any country but France, and the same might be said of *Lights Out*. In both cases an artistic, if scarcely a popular, success was attained.

**Translation.**—In translation the same rule holds good, and is, if anything, still more comprehensive, for as in adaptation the characters themselves may be changed, in translation that is not so, consequently it does not do to select plays in which even the types of characters are too purely local to be appreciated anywhere but at home! Not long ago a German play, called *Champions of Morality*, was produced by the Stage Society. It was most beautifully constructed with nothing at all left to the imagination, as is generally the case with German plays. Every character was a philosopher, and busy explaining how each event as it occurred proved him to be right, and so the plot wound along, finally turning back upon itself in the way good plots have, and the humour of the play, which had apparently been mislaid all this time, was seen to be in the situation. To those knowing something of German life and character, and the characteristic which compels a German to philosophize through the most trying situations, the progress of the play was vastly entertaining, but those who did not understand and were unable to appreciate this characteristic, but

quite competent to grapple with the plot, were too exhausted by the time that it unravelled itself to appreciate it.

A solecism frequently committed is to introduce a character in a translation, speaking broken English, at a time when he is supposed to be speaking to his own compatriots. When, and when not to do this was very well illustrated in *An Englishman's Home* (a very unjustly treated play on the whole, for in spite of its garishness and almost offensive patriotism, it had distinct merits as a play; it was decidedly dramatic, and some of the characterization was excellent). There was a foreign officer in that play; when addressing his own men he spoke perfect English, but when addressing the Englishmen, he spoke with a strong foreign accent, thus producing exactly the right illusion. There has often been much discussion as to how far a translation should be literal, but surely the answer is obvious. As far as possible, providing the words used by the foreigner in his own language would correspond exactly to those that an Englishman would use under the same circumstances; but otherwise *never*, and it is very big otherwise!

In translating dialogue the letter is practically unimportant. It is the spirit that counts. If you can retain both, well and good, but for goodness' sake do not sacrifice the latter to the former. It is the equivalent that is needed. Not long ago I read a



translation of a French play in which the principal female character described as *spirituelle* in the French was rendered "spiritual" in the English. For those who do not understand French I may point out that the nearest equivalent we have in English is "vivacious" or "witty"!

With regard to patois and dialect, hitherto a compromise has generally been effected; for it scarcely seemed possible for a Parisian *gamin* to speak London "Street-arabic" and still retain his individuality as a Parisian, yet the experiment has been tried and with some success by Lady Gregory, who has made translations of Molière's plays, in which the French patois is transformed into the Irish brogue. The plays, I understand, are shortly to be published, and dramatists will have an opportunity of judging for themselves.\*

The conclusion of the whole matter seems to be that in a translation the dramatic value and charm of diction has to be sacrificed, and that is the reason why so much is lost in translating French plays, where diction and the charm and play of words for their own sake have perhaps greater dramatic value than in any other language. The French language seems to be the most musical, the German the most scientific, and the English the most serviceable.

**Adaptation of Novels.**—Not long ago a well-known

\* *The Kiltartan Molière*, by Lady Gregory. Dublin: Maunsell & Co., Ltd., 19 Middle Abbey Street.

debating society held a debate the subject of which was, "Should Novelists write Plays?" Well, surely there is no reason why they shouldn't if they can! But it must be remembered that to adapt a novel requires very nearly as much ability as to write a good original play, and on the occasions when it has been done successfully the novelist has generally called to his aid some one with the necessary technical knowledge, a thing in which he, by the very virtue of his calling, lacks. Of course there are exceptions—notably J. M. Barrie, who, by the way, has not written any novels of late! In this connection it may be interesting to point out that the present writer has in his possession a criticism of an early play of Barrie's in which the critic deplores the novelist's excursion into the drama, and advises him against writing any more plays, doubting the possibility of his acquiring the new art. The same critic, an Irishman, also advocates the proverbial operation for humour on Barrie's Scottish brain. Thousands must be glad Barrie never took the first piece of advice, and if he took the second the operation has certainly been very successful! His success in both departments is certainly encouraging to all novelists. Of course the two arts are totally different, more widely so than painting and sculpture. A situation that makes dramatic reading in a novel may have little or no dramatic value on the stage. Which form of art is the more difficult it is hard to say, but

E



probably to write a play requires more all-round ability, and, of course, the market for plays is very much more limited. There is a larger market for second-rate novels than for second-rate plays. One reason for this lies, perhaps, in the fact that stage weaknesses of character, etc., which might pass unnoticed in a novel, show up under the glare of the footlights. A novel appeals so purely to the imagination that we are apt to forget the world we live in and get into that of the novel. A play, on the other hand, appeals to the senses as well as to the imagination, is more objective, the characters are obviously clothed in flesh and blood like other mortals and are expected to behave as such. In a novel you may employ almost unlimited time and space to describe the state of mind that provokes a certain course of action, but in a play the action must speak for itself! A novel is an analysis, a play, a portrayal. In writing a play from a novel, as much selection, arrangement and disposal of characters and events is required as in writing a play from life, so why not write it from life? In that case you will have a far wider field to choose from. The novelist-playwright writing novels and writing plays will find that they are totally different, and there is danger of his falling between two stools, and being unable to get back to the first if he does succeed in sitting comfortably on the second! It has been proved more than once that it is possible to

jump from one to the other at will, and even sit comfortably on both at once, but to do so requires a great deal of hard work, of practice, some of which may be saved by collaboration with some one who has the requisite technical knowledge of the stage. The results of this method are seldom very satisfactory. Ideal collaboration comes when both parties know all about it: an example may be found in the novels of Besant and Rice. Most managers of theatres could furnish any author with the names of a number of professional collaborators, play-doctors, etc., who undertake this sort of work. Perhaps I have said enough to open the novelist's eyes to the size and cost of the undertaking when he sets out to write a play.

**American Plays in England and English Plays in America.**—Many plays are submitted to London theatres from America and vice versa, and authors sending them must observe the general rules that already have been outlined in the above sections, on adaptation and translation. It is no use sending plays to England or America of which the situations depend on purely local conditions. This has been frequently proved, notably by the failure to attract in England of such big American successes as *Strongheart*, *The College Widow*, *The New York Idea*, already mentioned, and others, and in America *Diana of Dobson's* and *An Englishman's Home* have proved equally abortive. *Strongheart* and *The College Widow*, excel-

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lent though they were in their way, only entertained those of the audience who were sufficiently intelligent to grasp the situation from the American point of view. Probably the great attraction for Americans lay in the fact that both these plays vividly recalled their own student days, which of course was not the case in England. It is interesting to compare their failure to attract with George Alexander's very successful production of *Old Heidelberg*, a play that dealt incidentally with German student life, but whose principal theme was a very pretty and moving love story. In *The College Widow* love stories occurred, but they were very secondary considerations, and the *motif* of the play was football, a thing that interests English theatre audiences about as much as Tennyson's *Falcon*. Again, in *Strongheart* the *motif*, that of the love of an Indian for a white girl, has naturally not the same gripping force in England as in America, where such problems actually arise.

On the whole, more English plays are successful in America than American ones in England. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that Americans are less insular than we are, but more so to the sentimental attraction that the mother country naturally exercises over the descendants of her wandering sons. On the other hand, Englishmen, when sending plays to America, must be careful that they do not depend on problems and situations arising out of social

conditions which do not exist in America, and with which Americans have no sympathy. There are such. The Englishman has the reputation in America, it seems, of being unable to see a joke; and many American authors seem to go out of the way to pack the plays destined for England with them, and evidently not troubling much about their quality as they will not be seen. A foolish proceeding. One sends plays to a manager to show him what one can do, not what he can't!

As a matter of fact, genuine humour is very evenly distributed everywhere, and a new variety and fresh point of view is as likely to please an English audience as any other. A new situation is not, as a rule, so entertaining as a new way of looking at an old one. Of course all these remarks cut both ways, and apply equally to English plays in America. The constant interchange of plays between the two countries, and finding of a common ground where both can meet, is a thing of very happy augury for the future.

**Plays with a Purpose.**—Many plays are written to draw attention to some social grievance or public evil; and, incidentally, of course, to fill the pockets of the author. The West End is fond of showing up the East End, and vice versa. All these are of themselves bad reasons for writing a play. I know that, as a matter of fact, plays that preach sermons often succeed, especially in England, but their success is



generally due to the manner rather than the matter of the sermon.

✓ A very fine example of a play with a purpose is John Galsworthy's *Justice*, but it is the ripe effort of a matured and experienced playwright. The best advice I can give the tyro is to leave all such experiments severely alone until he has gained the ear of the public with work done on less hazardous lines. He should not begin with a heavy handicap.

## V

**Essentials and Ingredients.**—The first essential of a play is of course that it should be dramatic. The term is not used here in its technical but in its broader sense. The word "drama" is derived from a Greek word meaning to do, to act, and drama may be briefly defined by the simple word action. Drama begins when action begins, the action may be purely mental and still dramatic. There have been very dramatic plays written in which the characters did nothing but sit on chairs and talk, but their talk had a definite result and visible effect on the situation, and nothing was the same at the end of the play as it was at the beginning, but of course this sort of drama, appealing as it does purely to the mind and intellect of the audience, is scarcely likely to appeal to a public all eyes and ears. At the same time, it is useless to deny it the name of drama. In the case of the Gunpowder Plot, drama began, as far as the public was concerned, when they entered the cellar and found the unfortunate Guy sitting by his barrels, waiting to fire the train. Had he succeeded and



blown up the Lords, the situation would have been still more dramatic! A dramatic plot is a plot that produces dramatic situations. One character has one point of view, another another. So long as they keep quiet nothing happens, but the moment they let out, the situation becomes dramatic. So that whatever kind of play our author elects to write, whether the drama is in the realm of words or deeds it must be there.

Webster defines a drama as "a composition . . . tending towards and terminating in some striking result." From this it may be gathered that nothing is dramatic which has not some distinct bearing on the *dénouement*, and therefore the dramatist must continually keep his end in view, and, in the process of selection that constitutes his art, be careful to avoid irrelevancies and side-issues which, however interesting and excellent in themselves, have no natural bearing on the point at issue. To put it briefly, he should do nothing without a reason, and that reason a dramatic one.

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**Theme.**—On the subject of theme there is very little to be said except that there is a general tendency to confuse theme with plot; the two, in reality, being quite distinct. The theme may be described as the idea that gives rise to the plot. For example, in Barrie's play, *What Every Woman Knows*, the theme was the relationship of a wife to a husband after she has found him out. The plot

was the arrangement of forces intended to illustrate that theme, and this situation was produced by that arrangement. With regard to the choice of theme there is very little to be said, except that perhaps, for stage purposes, the older and the more familiar the theme the better. To appreciate a situation at its full value, the playgoer must be thoroughly familiar with all its ingredients, he should not be unable to see the wood for the trees. That being so, I should warn intending dramatists against choosing for their themes new creeds, new philosophies, and new theories that are not yet accepted as facts by the general mass of the playgoing public. Not long ago a play was sent to the present writer depending for its main situation upon the wonder-working powers of a science whose claims to that title are not generally recognized as valid. Consequently to the large majority of the audience the situation was unconvincing and lacked grip, just as would have been the case twenty years ago had wireless telegraphy been brought into play. Shakespeare's advice to the actor "To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" applies equally well to the dramatist. But it must be done in such a way that the audience can see what is in the mirror. This does not mean that the author is simply to pander to their tastes, but that it is his duty if he takes something from them, to see that they get something in return. He has got to stoop to their



understanding, not expect them to rise to his. That is his art and what he is paid for. The public cannot be expected to see the thing for themselves and then turn round and pay him because he saw it first, and merely told them it was there.

The dramatist has a very much broader field before him in the matter of themes than heretofore, as many things which were formerly considered too sacred for the theatre are now welcomed and accepted in the spirit in which they are written. One can understand some things being unfit for the stage on account of their badness, but that anything is too good for anywhere is hard to realize. Not long ago a play was written around a great artist whose personality has been the cause of much idolatry among his followers, some of whom said it was desecration to put him on the stage! In other words, the theatre was beyond the pale. However, people are broader and more tolerant than they were, and the dramatist has a wider choice of themes than formerly. Of course the subjects that interest the greatest number of people will naturally make the most popular themes, and consequently love is the most popular of them all. So much so, that it has hitherto been laid down as a maxim that a play cannot exist without a love interest, and that the chief interest. Yet there are plays, from *Hamlet* to *Peter Pan*, which have achieved world-wide popularity in spite

of the fact that love plays a very minor, if any, part in them. Religion is a subject that interests a vast number of people, and plays with a pleasant sermon are generally popular—if well done. A poor play with a fine moral may attract quite a new public, a public that does not generally go to the theatre; a good play with no moral to speak of, will attract the genuine play-loving public; but a good play with a good moral ropes in everybody! Such a play was *A Message from Mars*, quite a good play in its way. By far the larger portion of the public goes to the theatre to be amused, therefore the more amusing the theme the more likely the play is to become popular; but, at the same time, good thoughtful plays, with a thoughtful theme, if well done and interesting, may attract large audiences. Politics and finance are not popular themes. Many excellent plays have been written on the latter subject but with no very great success, and much money has been lost in producing them. Politics and finance evidently bring out the least interesting side of human nature, and this probably explains the taste for the private details of a public man's life. Royalty and its trials and tribulations are very popular themes. Every one loves to be present at a court, even if it is only a mimic one, but the dramatist who writes upon such subjects must be careful to get them up properly—as already hinted elsewhere. In spite of what may be said to the contrary, I have no



hesitation in saying that what the Americans call a good "sexy" play is not popular, on the British stage, at any rate. It may be due to prudery, or to genuine refinement, but a close investigation of the most popular plays of the last twenty or thirty years will reveal the fact that dirty linen does not attract large audiences. Take any of our leading dramatists and examine their most popular successes—Pinero, Oscar Wilde, Jones, Barrie, Shaw, Barker, Hubert Henry Davies. Probably the two most popular plays Pinero has written are *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* and *His House in Order*. In a sense they were both sexy, but the attraction, in both cases, did not lie in watching the process of a sordid intrigue, but in watching the battle against the inevitable consequences of the same. There have been plays innumerable, most admirably written and deftly constructed, but dealing with intrigue, pure and simple, or rather impure and complicated, that have failed to command any real success. This is not written from any prudish motive; but it is a fact that it does seem necessary, for a play to be popular, for there to be some evidence of the better side of human nature asserting itself, and something for the human affections to rest upon.

How far the theatre and the life behind the scenes form a popular theme on the stage it is difficult to say; it is certainly a very popular one off it. Actors are supposed to be always talking shop, but their lay friends do not give them much chance

of talking anything else. And yet facts seem to show that "behind the scenes" plays are not always so successful as would be expected. *Trelawney of the Wells* was not very successful at its initial appearance, but was more so when recently revived. *Zaza*, of course, was immensely popular, but "behind the scenes" played a very small part in it! Of course this is all probably due to the fact that the great charm exercised by the other side of the curtain over those in front lies in the fact of the curtain being there. If you raise it the charm is dispelled and the gilt comes off the gingerbread.

Military themes are generally popular, and, of course, always so in war time. *The Second in Command* would never have reaped the enormous harvest it did in times of peace.

Detective and burglar plays, if well done, are always popular, and it is almost a *sine qua non* that the hero, if a detective, must catch his man, or get off scot free if a burglar. In Maurice Leblanc's French novel, *Arsène Lupin contre Herlock Sholmes* the *entente cordiale* has been most beautifully maintained, and things are so arranged that neither party gets the upper hand of the other, though each one gains his own point, and it seems almost as though a good thing had been missed in not using this episode for the play that was produced on the subject.\*

\* Since the above was written a new play upon this episode has been produced with very great success at the Châtelet Theatre in Paris.



**Plot.**—How often one hears the remark, "If only I could think of a good plot, I am sure I could write a play," and many hold that the plot is *the* most important thing in the whole play. Both these things are somewhat exaggerated statements. Undoubtedly the plot is very important, but is it any more important than the characterization, situation, dialogue, and all the other things that go to make up a good play? A true sense of proportion is a most necessary thing to a dramatist, and if he possesses that he will very soon find that there is not much to choose in importance between the different ingredients. The first condition of success in a play is that it should be capable of interesting an audience composed of people from all ranks of society, and with different standards of education. That being so, the dramatist need not rack his brains too hard in the endeavour to find something new in the way of a plot. Novelty is sometimes popular, but not always, nor even generally, and it is always very difficult to come by. You may succeed in turning out something quite new once, it will be more difficult to do it twice, and practically impossible three times, and then you will find yourself risking a fall into a condition frequently met with, that of the one-play man.

Human nature is very conservative and very lazy, and requires strong inducements before it will bestir itself to seek and appreciate a novelty. As much

novelty as is necessary will generally be found in the individuality of the dramatist himself, in the freshness of his own point of view, and that novelty will always be at hand if he writes out of his own heart, and lets us see what he really thinks and feels, rather than what would be expected of him were he the fine fellow he would like the public to think him.

Human nature is, and always will be, deeply interested in itself. It is, therefore, in the most ordinary and every-day events rather than in the miraculous and exceptional that attractive plots are to be found. And well it is for the dramatist that it is so. For he will find, if his eyes are open, that life teems with plots for plays. It is the ability to *see* rather than to *invent*, the good plot, that makes the dramatist.

Plots should be simple and not complicated, and not twisted into sub-plot and counter-plot. These latter devices are now as dead as the dodo and not half as interesting. A distinguished critic once told the present writer that unless the dramatist could write out a sufficient *résumé* of his plot on the back of a picture postcard, without interfering with the picture, it was not worth working out, and experience has proved that he was right. Take, for instance, a great play and its plot, *Macbeth*. The actual plot may be summéd up in a very few words. It shows how a man in the hour of success is



tempted, and though not at first actually falling wavers; his wife then comes to the tempter's aid, and falling herself, drags him down with her. From that moment catastrophe on catastrophe occurs until the end of the play, when the woman, worn out with remorse and horror at her wicked deeds, dies, and the man ends his life, not unwillingly, in mortal combat with the person whom he has most grievously injured. That is the plot of the play. The ghost of Banquo, Banquo himself, the three witches, Duncan, and all the rest of it, are accessories, furniture, padding, what you will! The theme is ambition. The plots of *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *The Doll's House*, *John Bull's Other Island* are all equally simple.

Another great advantage to the present-day dramatist is that in respect of plot, as in all else, the horizon has of recent years very much widened, and where it used to be said that there was only one plot, the triangular one, people are now interested in plays in which a love affair may play a very minor, if any part (though, to be sure, Shakespeare made that discovery!). The success of a play like *Chains* shows that all interest need not necessarily end with the marriage of the happy couple, and that the sex is not the only problem that is interesting, though, judging from the modern French play, they still seem to think it is in France.

All these considerations point to the fact that the acquisition of a plot is not really so difficult as at first sight appears, and all that the dramatist needs to do is to rack his brains a little less and open his eyes a little wider. But "The play's the thing!" A plot without a play is a dull business, but one can quite understand a play without a plot being novel and entertaining.

**Situation.**—Just as the theme produces the plot, so the plot produces the situation or situations. With some writers the situation is the principal thing, and they begin by conceiving one that will be strong enough for the central interest of the play, and then deliberately lead up to it. The French dramatist Henri Bernstein, as he himself has told us, is one of these, although, to be more precise, he first conceives a certain type of character, one that is likely to get into a strong dramatic situation, then he realizes what that situation would probably be, and works backwards until he arrives at a plot that would produce it. There has been some discussion as to where a dramatist should begin writing a play, but surely if he is master of his art, he should be able to begin anywhere, just as a draughtsman or any other artist should, and work backwards or forwards, as long as the play, when completed, moves forwards. Like everything else in a play, the situation must be dramatic, it must produce action, motion—something must happen—stagnation will

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never do. It is astonishing what a live thing drama is. One really dramatic situation will make a whole play. The Screen Scene in *The School for Scandal* is a fine instance of a situation, sufficient in itself to make a play ; indeed it is, probably, the making of that play. The moment that screen is knocked down every one on both sides of the curtain is in the know ; and it is not Lady Teazle that is behind it but Joseph Surface, and the maps and learning and cant displayed upon it form a deliciously subtle conception ! There are, alas ! too many instances of situations where nothing happens, where there is no *dénouement*. One was recently furnished in a play entitled *Making a Gentleman*, by Alfred Sutro. The situation at the end of that play was just the same as it was in the beginning. Nobody was a penny the wiser, nothing had happened that led up to any revelation. An old man was just as purblind and stupid at the end of the play as he was at the beginning, and those around him just as aware of his purblindness and stupidity. Roughly speaking, the plot might be described as "an old man of humble origin, wishing to make a gentleman of his son, educates him beyond his station in life, and then kicks at the successful result." Had the old man at the end of the play made a speech something like this : "I've been an old ass ! I wanted to turn out a gentleman and I've done it ! Now, in my old age, it suits me better that you should be a tradesman !

It's all my own fault ; you run along and marry your baroness and I'll get back to my pickles. Milly" (his adopted daughter) "will come with me, and we shall be Carey and Daughter instead of Carey and Son!" the situation would have been dramatic and might have made a great difference to the success of a play that had admirable work in it, indeed so excellent were some of the situations that the killing effect of the stagnation at the end was all the more marked. The same author's *Walls of Jericho* had nothing in it one half as good as some of the scenes in *Making a Gentleman*, but it had one really dramatic situation, and that drew the town.

Perhaps the most dramatic scene in *Hamlet* is the climax of the "play-scene," where the success of the ruse becomes apparent. That is the place where Hamlet is taken right out of himself, stops philosophizing, and begins to know and to do.

If there is such a thing as a hard and fast rule to be made with regard to situation, it is that, now-a-days, the principal ones must take place on the stage, in full view of the audience. Many a time have I had to return a MS. with quite a possible plot, and with a note to the effect that if the thing were rewritten, and we were shown what we were only told about, it might be acceptable. The only exceptions to this rule are when the climax is of such a nature that it cannot be reproduced, as in the case already mentioned of the fight between Macbeth



and Macduff, and other cases that are better imagined than described, and the author would be wise to avoid plots that lead to such. In the old Greek drama it was the custom to do many things, and then come on and talk about them. In Shakespeare's day they did them and talked about them at the same time. Now-a-days things move more quickly, and drama must be drama and nothing else.

Anticlimaxes, too, must be avoided. An anticlimax is a scene which, though intended to be the culminating one, is really weaker and less final than some other scene that has preceded it. By many the last scene in *The Merchant of Venice* is considered an anticlimax, but if that is so it is not due so much to construction as, possibly, to an error of judgment on Shakespeare's part, in not realizing that the grim story of Shylock would be more interesting to the general public than the charming love story of Bassanio and Portia, or perhaps he did not think of the general public.

The strength of the situations must be progressive, accumulating in interest until the culminating point is reached; this occurs in the majority of plays in the last act but one, but a finer effect is achieved if it occurs in the last act. And there always must be a culminating point. Plays have been written with no climax, anti- or otherwise, and the effect produced on seeing them is like going upstairs in

the dark and thinking there is one more step than there really is!

**Characterization.**—Characterization, now-a-days, is becoming quite as important as plot, and in the matter of it it is not so easy to impose poor material as it used to be. Caricature will no longer pass as character. There is nothing like the stage for showing up caricature, and this perhaps explains the fact that Dickens has never been very successful on the stage excepting in the one instance of *The Tale of Two Cities*, the least "caricature" of all his novels. Characters are also not so likely to be taken at their own valuation. The old-fashioned hero, parading all the popular virtues, is at last beginning to be found out!

Characters must be dramatic, the type of person likely to produce drama. Men and women of action, or else of such inaction as to produce action on the part of others! The loquacious bore and arm-chair theorist has no place in drama, until something happens to stop his boring and theorizing. It is when somebody gets up and kicks him that the drama begins! Of course, as pointed out in the section on drama, a certain amount of drama comes in when the theorist arrives at a conclusion which completely changes his mental state, as in Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*, when, after an hour or so of head-splitting talk, Donna Ana arrives at a very dramatic conclusion.



Character should develop along natural lines. Sudden conversions are not good. It used to be the custom to transform a hero into a villain, or a villain into a hero at a moment's notice, but that is no longer convincing. There was a good instance of natural growth in the formation of character in Rudolf Bésier's *Don*. There was a personage in that play, one Thompsett, a narrow, tub-thumping, preaching bigot, a great scoundrel in his youth who had suddenly seen the error of his ways and gone through a sort of Pauline conversion in the Park. There was no doubt about it, the man really was saved, and would in future go up the hill instead of down, but he had a long way to go before he became anything but a brute, and at last some one came along with the courage to tell him so to his face, with the result that the previous experience stood him in good stead when the truth was presented to him in a less attractive form, and he went a step further in his regeneration. Now supposing the author had made the man rise from his knees in the Park, a ready-made saint then and there, the situation might have been pleasing, but it would have been very unconvincing, and in the place of an extremely dramatic character with real force in it, we should have had a very bread-and-buttery business. Characters appear on the stage composed like ordinary mortals of flesh and blood, and should "behave according."

Be sure and keep your characters distinct. The remarks they make and their personal characteristics must not be intermingled; a funny remark made simply because it is funny, by a character that is supposed to have no sense of humour! Nor should the wrong thing be done by the wrong character as is so often the case; the dramatist must take the trouble to find out the right man to do the right thing.

There is a type of play in which the different characteristics of the persons is only defined by their clothes and "get-up," in which every character is cast in the same mould. This sort of play, as a rule, depends entirely upon the individual brilliance of the writer. He simply uses his characters as puppets to expound his own ideas. As long as the ideas are interesting and propounded in an interesting way, well and good, but the fountain has less chance of running dry and a more inexhaustible source to draw upon if it is fed from the spring of life in general, rather than of life in one particular.

A great sign of the times is the modern advance in character painting. Instead of seeing characters in black and white, people now see them grey, and there is a chance for everybody. Even in the outside world talents, brains, and power seem more evenly distributed than formerly, and the stage still holds the mirror up to nature! Of course there are still dark spots and a large market for the most horrible form of melodrama, but the outlook is improving,



and there is a rapidly growing market for plays in which the interest is distributed fairly evenly over the whole cast.

Character drawing should always be sympathetic, which is not meant in the sense generally used by actors, namely, a character that gains the sympathy of the audience by his conduct! In the hands of a really great writer every character in a play is sympathetic, because we are allowed to see and understand the innermost workings of his nature, and the most sympathetic character evokes our profoundest sympathy when we find out what his aims and his temptations are. Many would be murderers if they had a loaded revolver handy at the right moment! Take, for instance, perhaps the liveliest pair of criminals in the drama, Macbeth and his lady. Can anything provoke deeper sympathy than the sleep-walking scene, or Macbeth's last speech before his fight with Macduff? And this sympathy is not lessened because the punishment is deserved; as a matter of fact it is in some ways deeper! It is this ability to present the whole character that makes the sympathetic and consequently popular dramatist. There are two ways of becoming popular: by carefully avoiding people's corns, or by treading so gently that you do not hurt them; the former is the easier way, but the latter lasts longer. In order to render characters interesting do not depend upon their outward characteristics so much as upon

individuality, their individual points of view and use in the development of the play. Some characters in plays depend for their interest upon quite extraneous tricks of personality and so forth, but these things are not really convincing, and when done, as they so often are, for the sake of the laughs, have no more value than the comic pieces of scenery one uses in pantomimes!

**Dialogue.**—With dialogue, as with everything else, simplicity and naturalness are the key-notes. As has already been pointed out, the simpler the dialogue the more gripping the situation. Many a time has the strength of a good situation been diluted with too much talk or frittered away in cheap little laughs by a lot of silly epigrams and irrelevant paradoxes.

Dialogue must be *dramatic*, it must be the words produced by and illustrating, not describing, action. Dialogue that is not either the outcome or the provocative cause of the situation actually visible on the stage is generally undramatic, that which is introduced solely for the purpose of giving information to the audience always so. As this *last* is a trap into which so many fall, it would be as well to give an illustration of what is meant by undramatic dialogue—

GUARDIAN (*addressing ward*): "When your late uncle died leaving me your sole guardian, and stipulating in his will that you were to



keep your inheritance a secret until your marriage morn—etc., etc.”

This is bad and undramatic. There is no attempt at the art which conceals art. It is obvious that it is all stale news to the ward, though new to the audience! The situation on the stage too is undramatic. Let us change it. The ward knows nothing of the terms of her uncle's will and is being informed of it for the first time :

“This is your uncle's will. He leaves you the whole of his property in trust to me for you, to be paid over to you on your wedding day. There is a curious condition that you shall not divulge—etc.”

Drama is at once introduced. The audience gets its information by listening at the key-hole. That is always the position of the audience in a good play with good acting. If for the sake of the play it was imperative that the ward should have been aware of the terms of the will before the curtain went up, then some less clumsy means must be devised than that of getting some one to tell her who already knows that she knows !

The method employed by the dramatist to impart his information to the audience must be the method of the *dramatist*, not that of the story teller. It is as illegitimate for the dramatist to employ the story teller's methods to convey a situation to the audience

as it would be for an artist to play "Home, Sweet Home" on a cornet to help with the explanation of his domestic picture. Humour and wit are just as essential to a play if it is to be interesting, as they are to life. But they must be simple and natural and not strained. The quality of humour, like the quality of mercy, is not strained. Of course there are plays, and successful ones, in which no single character ever opens his mouth without making a witty remark or an epigram, and yet the characters are not all intended to be wits. But, as previously pointed out, in these instances it is not really the play that attracts, but the witty, amusing author as seen through the play. To go to it is like spending an evening in his company, and just as people will gladly pay a half-guinea to hear him speak on anything, so they will to hear his play, and talk about him and his brilliance afterwards. On the other hand, to see a good performance of *As You Like It* is like spending a week-end in the forest of Arden. The personality of the author is completely sunk in the play, and it is with something of a start that we realize that it is all the work of one man. To the present writer the very impersonality of Shakespeare's work is one of the best proofs of their authorship. The little that is known of Will Shakespeare of Stratford all points to his having had the same nature if not the same name as the author of the plays!



A good piece of dialogue may survive when the play in which it occurred has long since been dead. An instance of this appeared very recently in the revival of a play called *Richelieu* by Lord Lytton, in which the remark occurs, "The pen is mightier than the sword!" The play has been dead a good many years, and at its revival showed no signs of life excepting to reveal itself as the original source of a remark that has passed into the language as a proverb.

The dramatist must keep all his characters distinct in his mind, see them individually, hear them talk, and never set down a line for one which obviously belongs to another. Read your dialogue over and imagine your characters speaking in your own room. Would they use the words you have set down? If not, blot them out and put in the words they would use! This is, of course, not so easy as it appears, for however natural your dialogue may be, it must, in a sense, be unnatural in order to fit in with the artificial conditions and restrictions, especially that of time, of a theatre. But this is done by a process of elimination rather than alteration. The words your characters use should be the words they would use in real life, only not *all* of them, only those that are necessary for the further development of the dramatic situation. Here, again, the artist comes in as the selector rather than as the creator.

Be careful not to introduce fun and humour into

your dialogue merely as a sop to the public. If they are not there naturally do not attempt to put them there by force! If you do they will miss fire, and it is better to have no fireworks than ones that will not go off. Avoid *conscious* "style" and artificiality in writing plays. The present writer once had a letter from a would-be author to the effect that "you would not have me write a serious play in the same style as *The Importance of Being Earnest*?" Most certainly I would. The charm of Wilde's play is that although the persons in it say and do such outrageous things, they are said and done so naturally that the play becomes quite plausible and even convincing.

Do not put clever remarks into the mouths of fools, but if you introduce a bore you must take care he does not bore your audience. This wants watching, though it is not really a very difficult thing to do, for the reason, perhaps, that a good imitation of anything is amusing.

A play is a picture of life in concentrated form, therefore remember that your dialogue, too, must be concentrated—do not diffuse it with too many words, at the same time be careful not to make it too epigrammatic, as then it gets tiresome in the other direction. If a good epigram comes naturally into your mind when writing, as a natural result of the situation, let us have it by all means, but do not drag it in.



**Curtains.**—The curtain plays a less aggressive part in the drama now-a-days than used to be the case, but it still has very important work to do and must be lowered at the right time and place. An effective curtain was so much sought after in the old days that often a whole act was sacrificed to building it up, and waiting for it was like wading through a lot of rubbish at a music-hall for the star turn. Now-a-days the public expects to be entertained the whole time, and the curtain plays a more passive part in the entertainment. It no longer bangs noisily and self-consciously down, but descends almost imperceptibly at a point where a curtain phase in the development of the play has been reached, where the action may be arrested safely without the play being weakened. Thus the curtain fulfils its real function, that of giving a rest to the audience and allowing them an opportunity of commenting on the play, in much the same way as was done in the old Greek drama, where there was no curtain, by the chorus, who, however, in addition to providing a rest also did the commenting.

## VI

**Construction.**—We now come to the very important matter of construction, the rock upon which so many would-be dramatists split. In constructing a play two things have to be borne in mind. First, the basic principles, the form or figure of the play, which practically never changes; and, secondly, the cut of its garments when clothed, a thing that continually changes. Certain fixed laws for the former were recognized many hundred years ago by Aristotle, and pointed out by him in his *Poetics*, and it is worth the tyro's while to get hold of these and study them carefully. If he cannot read Greek he had better get at least two translations. There is one by Professor Butcher, published by Macmillan; and another by Buckley, published by George Bell and Sons in Bohn's Library; both only cost a shilling or two. Aristotle says that a play must have a beginning, a middle, and an end; that is to say, that the main situation or plot being selected, the first care must be to put the audience *au fait* with that situation, the second to develop it for what its dramatic possibilities are worth, and the third to



wind it up, not necessarily by putting an end to all further public interest in the characters by killing or marrying them, but by bringing the curtain down at a point where some sort of definite conclusion is arrived at in the development of the situation. *not* Imagine a chemist carrying on an experiment. He begins by selecting different substances (characters), puts them into a test tube (the theatre), and sets them working by means of heat, acid, or some other force that will have an effect upon them all. Life, or what he takes to be life, is the force the dramatist uses. Dramatic action at once commences, pleasant or unpleasant, mild or strong, according to the nature of the substances, the temperature of the flame applied, the atmosphere surrounding the test tube, and a hundred other considerations. Finally a time comes when the action subsides and a definite result is obtained, a new mixture is formed, in which all the original substances play a part. That is the end of the experiment—the play. From his previous knowledge of the substances of which this mixture is formed and composed the chemist classifies the result, and so do we as we go home after the play. In this simile it will again be seen that the dramatist figures as a looker-on, an experimentalist. He neither creates the substances nor the mixture, but merely selects them with due regard to their capacity to produce a result that will be dramatically interesting—life does the rest. As he gets more experienced in his

work and acquires a greater knowledge of human nature, he will know beforehand exactly what mixtures produce what results, and play-writing and selection will become very much easier; but many experiments will have to be performed, and perhaps some test tubes broken, before he becomes a good enough chemist to conduct a perfectly successful operation and one in which we can see the dramatic action going on all the time. It is not a good thing to introduce into a play, any more than it is into an experiment, some substance that emits such a dense smoke, unpleasant odour, or makes so much noise, that we are unable to discern the action in progress, and the why and wherefore is temporarily lost sight of! However, this rule is not such an arbitrary one as it used to be, and the element of surprise is now recognized as not only permissible but even advantageous; at the same time, the surprise, if it is to do its work properly, must be a dramatic one and offer sufficient compensation for the time during which the drama has been temporarily lost sight of. Too strong literary flavour, self-conscious style, the all-pervading personality of the author, didactic talk, preachiness, and even poetry, are all liable to cloud the drama, though, of course, if the cloud itself is beautiful the audience will not mind looking at it. In any case, none of these considerations should be the first with the aspiring dramatist.

G



Chaos is impossible in a play, there must be form. Order should certainly be the dramatist's first law.

A play is a work of art, an artificial arrangement of things presented under artificial conditions, and the dramatist's object is to conceal all traces of this artificiality, in short, to produce an illusion, "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." Various limitations of time, space, etc., prevent everything being externally reflected, but that which we see and hear is sufficient to indicate the remainder, and the illusion should be complete enough to transport us for the time being into the world of the play. Roughly speaking, this transportation is the object of the dramatist. In producing his illusion various dodges are used, but once seen through they have to be discarded, lest the illusion be spoilt. Soliloquies and asides are dodges that are no longer permissible. It may be urged that Shakespeare teems with them, but on a close examination a Shakespearean character will seldom be found soliloquizing for any but his own sake! He is thinking aloud. In badly-constructed plays the soliloquy is deliberately used as a method of giving information to the audience, the character would never make it if he were unaware of their existence. It is because he knows that he is alone that Hamlet makes the famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy, and that is why it is so convincing and so moving. The illegitimate soliloquy is not only bad art, it is downright treachery on the part of

the artist, deliberately in league with the audience of whose existence he is supposed to be unaware. But even legitimate soliloquies are not permitted now-a-days, the reason being, probably, that drama is effect and not cause. The same may be said in regard to asides. The aside that is a clumsy method of giving information to the audience is illegitimate, and there are not many such to be found in Shakespeare, although the natural aside—as when Launcelot Gobbo says: “Mark me now! Now will I raise the waters”—is common enough. But in modern play-writing even this would be redundant. To see him raise the waters is all we want!

Perhaps another reason for the continual changes of fashion in regard to the “dressing” of plays is the same as it is with clothes, that human nature continually demands external variety to hide the monotony of the internal arrangements!

In spite of all this, technique is almost purely a natural process, and the nearer you can get it to life the better. As it is with some of the greatest paintings so it is with plays, the method of workmanship cannot be detected, and it is almost impossible to tell how they are done, but of course there is a kind of play, just as there is a kind of picture, in which the actual method of the brush work and handling constitute one of the chief attractions. Sheridan, and in modern times Sardou and Pinero, are notable examples of this kind of



dramatist. We see their method of construction very plainly and admire its cleverness, but we are generally conscious of it, whereas in the case of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and others, the plays grow upon one almost imperceptibly, and a close examination betrays no specific method. The intending dramatist may adopt whichever method he may prefer, but in either case he must be able to create his illusion, and not remind his audience at the outset where they are by bringing on a character with some pregnant sentence obviously designed to convey a mine of information to an audience. Moreover, whichever method he chooses he must stick to it.

**The Unities.**—Though, as the whole history of the drama proves, it is not absolutely imperative, it will help to make things more convincing and interesting if the author observes the classic “unities.” They are as follows: First, the unity of time, *i. e.* continuous action from the rise of the curtain on the first act until its fall on the last; second, the unities of “place” and “scene,” which explain themselves; and third and most important of all, the unity of “plot.” All the different happenings should tend to one particular end. Sub-plot and counter-plot, as already stated, are things of the past, and no longer considered essential. It will be seen at once how the observance of these unities would, at any rate, simplify matters and increase the antecedent probability of the new author's success with

managers, critics, and public. In constructing a plot it must be remembered that it should turn and twist within itself, its wriggles should be produced from within, like those of a snake, not by some unseen force working from without. You may prod a snake from without and make him wriggle, but the wriggles will actually be produced by the animal's internal arrangements, and far more interesting than they would be if he were dead and you shook him by the tail! To quote from Aristotle (Butcher's translation)—

"It is therefore evident that the unravelling of the plot no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the *Deus ex machina*. The *Deus ex machina* should be employed only for events external to the drama, for antecedent or subsequent events which lie beyond the range of human knowledge and which require to be accepted or foretold, for to the gods we ascribe the power of seeing all things. Within the action there must be nothing irrational!"

The long and short of all this is that the plot must be *alive*!

The expression "weaving a plot" is, in a sense, almost a misnomer, or, at the best, the plot is generally woven before the play begins, and from the rise of the curtain onwards it is a process of *unravelling*.

A play starts with a misunderstanding, and the



clearing up of that forms the entertainment. The innermost becomes the outermost, things are overturned and overturned until they finally become what they really are. Take, for instance, *The Merchant of Venice*. In the laying out of the plot we get Shylock and his "merrie sport"! But it is not really a merrie sport at all, and Shylock knows it isn't. There is a malicious purpose underlying it, it is done in a spirit of malice, and a point comes in the play where the merrie sport throws off its mask (the Tubal scene) and stalks about in all its grimness, until the trial scene where it shows itself in its true colours! After that the biter is bit, and Shylock's own humiliation is brought about by something in the nature of a jest, a play upon words,—a scene which, far from being weak, is to the present writer's sense an instance of consummate craft on Shakespeare's part, for the devil always plays with a card up his sleeve!

It does not seem possible to give any golden rule for construction, but I should advise the dramatist to stick as closely as he can to nature, to employ selection rather than invention, and to be at the utmost pains to prevent dialogue, construction, or anything else, betraying the fact that he or any of his characters are aware of an audience, whose right attitude is that of a looker-on at the game, of whose presence the players are unaware.

Mr. Punch once published imaginary interviews with various distinguished golfers, in which they were

all asked the best way to drive a good ball, and the conclusion Mr. Punch came to was that the right thing to do must be to hit the ball at exactly the right moment, in just the correct way, with precisely the requisite amount of strength! Exactly the same may be said of a play! You can lay down no golden rule, the external conditions governing the stroke are so frequently changing, and the dramatist who wishes his plays to be publicly performed must be something of a journalist. He must be continually awake to the demands of the moment and the contemporary conditions. As stated in the opening chapter for first principles and basic construction, he may and must study the old masters of dramatic art, but if he wishes to write and produce plays himself he must go into the crowd and study contemporary life and drama, a fact that cannot be too often insisted upon.



## VII

**Completion.**—Having written the play, the next thing to do is to get it typed and in a fit condition to go the rounds of the managers. When having it typed it is a good thing to mark well the difference between the business and the dialogue, as it saves a deal of trouble in the reading. Merely to put the business into brackets is not sufficient, it is better to underline it in red, or some other colour that marks the distinction well. In the appendix will be found a specimen of a type-script—*The School for Scandal* as it might be sent the rounds now-a-days! There are some machines that write both red and black, and a MS. in which the business and the dialogue are thus differentiated is a delightful thing for a reader to read, whose experience, as a rule, is sufficient for him to grasp the “business” possibilities of a play by reading the dialogue alone. Avoid making stage directions too elaborate and minute. To begin with, it is a very easy thing to do effectively—on paper—and it smacks of amateurishness; and none but a very experienced playwright can do it so that it will remain anything like the same after the play has

been produced. Do not be too lavish in your descriptions of the characters. Their action and speeches in the play itself should unfold their characteristics. Treat the reader of your play as though he were the audience, not one of the actors. Plays are often prefaced by short scenario of the plot and principal characters. This is considerate and may save the reader some trouble, but it almost seems to imply a slight lack of confidence on the author's part in the ability of his play to draw attention to its own points, which should *never* be pointed out in the covering letter. If they cannot draw attention to themselves they are no use. *Never* suggest personal reasons or private necessities as an inducement to managers to buy your work. It is not business, and is completely useless as well as undignified. Remember that your MS. is one of scores, or hundreds, and do not write to inquire after its health without giving its title, your own name, and the date of submission. Always keep at least one spare copy by you, in case of accidents.

Do not be impatient at a little delay. To hear nothing of your work for some weeks, or even months, after it has been sent in may be a good sign. The reader may have passed it on to his manager, who again may have proposed it to some other manager for whom it may be more suitable.

**Placing a Manuscript.**—In this matter, strange though it may seem, success depends almost as much upon the sender as upon the person to whom the



MS. is sent. If the author's sole ambition is to leave a good play to posterity he has achieved it when the good play is completed. But we will take it that he wishes to go further and see his own work produced, and not only that, but to make money out of it. To do that he must consider the existing market. This market is generally a sore point with the would-be dramatist. He usually makes it the scapegoat on which to lay the blame for his want of success. But if he wishes to sell in that market, he must consider it from its own point of view. If after so doing he does not consider himself justified in writing for it, he can either wait for a better one, or open a stall with his own wares and see if he can attract the public.

A great number of the stalls in the existing market are occupied by actor-managers. Much has been said for and against this system, and undoubtedly it has both advantages and disadvantages from the dramatist's point of view, but the practical man is concerned mainly with the advantages. For even if the system is bad, it is surely permissible to make the best of a bad job!

One of the advantages, from the author's point of view, is this: the writer, with sufficient intelligence to write a good play, should certainly be able to gauge the capacities and make use of the mannerisms and personalities of our leading stars with fair accuracy and to suit his play to one or other of them. That,

if the play itself is good, is quite enough to insure acceptance.

The English market is broader than it used to be, and vastly increased opportunities now exist for any and every kind of dramatic adventure.

Besides the theatres run by actors, independent managers control an ever increasing number. They are neither actors nor authors, and accordingly offer an open market to every kind of ware. Also, in addition to the regular theatres, there are now in existence a number of societies which read and produce plays by new authors. With the exception of the Stage Society and the Play-Actors, most of these are amateur concerns. Far be it from the writer to say a word against them on that account, but it must be remembered that a successful *début* at one of these societies or clubs does not always mean that the play is really fit for the regular theatres, the audience at such times could scarcely be called impartial, and there has been more than one play hailed as a masterpiece on such an occasion, that is in no condition to succeed at a regular theatre. That these clubs serve a useful purpose in bringing out the possibilities latent in more than one embryo dramatist has been abundantly proved. But with very few exceptions—*Chains* by Elizabeth Baker, first produced by the Play-Actors, is one—there are few instances of their having brought to light hidden masterpieces. It must also be remembered that



*Careful*  
managers are, as a rule, chary of producing plays that are at once new and second-hand, and the inducement for them to do so must be very strong; so I should advise the aspiring dramatist to try these clubs as the last, not the first, resort.

*Then*  
The manager of a theatre costing thirty or forty thousand pounds a year to run, cannot afford to experiment with promise. He has to deal with the finished article, ready for the market, and of this he is, as a rule, the best judge. Nor is he always to blame when a play has to wait some years for its opportunity. The public is not always ready for it, and this explains the occasionally apparent neglect of a good play, or a good author who has been kept waiting a long time on the threshold. There are, of course, instances of plays that have been going the rounds for years and then had an enormous success when produced, but it is quite possible that they might not have been so successful if they had been produced earlier.

Of course the market in which playwrights are naturally most anxious to dispose of their wares is the London market, but there are in Dublin, Manchester, and Glasgow repertory theatres on the look out for new and native talent. Catering as they do for an especial public, these theatres demand, and are very successful in getting, work of a very high order.

From all this it will be seen that the successful

dramatist requires the knowledge, not only of how to write plays, but also how to get rid of them when written. This knowledge demands almost as much thought and astuteness as writing a play does!

Of course, if he does not care for the worry of seeking, or doubts his ability to find his market, he can apply to one of the many agents who will do it for him, but he must not imagine that by so doing he is increasing the possibilities of acceptance. Certainly to the present writer, and no doubt to others who are at the same work, it makes no difference whether a play comes through an agent or not. As a rule, the advantages of these gentlemen come in *after* plays have been accepted, when they may and do help writers through the uncongenial worries of financial bargaining.

A list of these agents, together with some names and addresses of societies and clubs open to produce plays by new authors will be found in the appendix at the end of this book.

**Acceptance and Production.**—In the ordinary course let us now suppose that the play has been accepted. The author may, perhaps, consider his task completed, but it is not by any means the case. The worrying part is just beginning! The feelings of an author when his play passes from his hands into those of the producer and the actors must be something akin to those of a young mother when she sends her ewe lamb to school! It is doubtless all for his good! Of



course, as the author gets on, he will be able to produce his plays himself, by which time he will have learnt that his own way is not always the best. Some one once said that a child was a flame to be fanned and not a pitcher to be filled, and the same may be said, in a lesser degree, of an actor. He must be given credit for some intelligence, though not too much ! Let him flounder about for a little. Do not suggest that he be deprived of the part after the first rehearsal or reading because he does not quite see your point of view. Look out for him. He may see possibilities in the character that you have overlooked. Writing, and especially inspired writing, is often almost unconscious, and an author is not always aware of the full value of his work.

There are two kinds of actors. The obedient actor who, even if he does not see the meaning of something can still do it convincingly, a kind beloved of the author, but rare ! And there is the actor who cannot carry out or portray your idea until it becomes his own. With such actors as this production is, of course, harder work, but perhaps, on the whole, the results are more satisfactory.

In dealing with "producers" and actors, Chamberlain's advice to diplomats, "Concede small things gracefully, hold out for big ones firmly," is worth following. Sacrifices and concessions to the medium through which you wish to present your work must be made. Certain things will have to be cut about

and altered at rehearsal. In the appendix will be found specimens of the original author's MS. and the prompt copy after the producer has finished with it.

**Special Productions.**—The author may like to produce his play himself at a special performance. In doing so he must bear in mind two things. First, that he is practically bound to lose a very considerable sum of money, as a single performance will have cost him, at any of the theatres that count, anything up to four or five hundred pounds, of which he cannot hope to get a quarter back ; and secondly, that he must be clear-sighted and not carried away by a *succès d'estime*, and remember what has already been said about managers being chary of producing second-hand plays. If they are good enough to overcome that chariness they would probably have done so in the first place, and been accepted and produced naturally with no risks to the author. On the other hand, there are one or two small halls and theatres in and around London that can be hired for a comparatively insignificant sum, and much may be learnt by a semi-private performance at one of these, where, if the thing is kept fairly quiet and restricted to a small audience, no harm will be done to your pocket and perhaps a great deal of good to your play. Advantage may be taken of the occasion to copyright the play. To do that in this country a public performance is necessary, and a copy of the play must be deposited at the Lord Chamberlain's office at least



seven days before production. The fees are a guinea for a one-act play, two guineas for anything longer.

**Contracts.**—The young author should not be too grasping in the matter of terms. On the other hand, it is neither fair to himself nor his brother authors to make himself too cheap. Business methods are such that it is more than likely every advantage will be taken of his youth and inexperience, but he can argue that if his play is worth the risk of production, it is worth paying for. The manager will point out what that risk amounts to in the case of a young and unknown author, the author may retaliate that the fact that the manager is willing to take it is a proof of the value of his play. A half-way position will have to be taken up, and the author would be well advised to be content with a reasonable percentage, say 5, 7½, and 10% on the first, second and third thousand pounds respectively of the gross weekly takings. He should, on no account, sell his play right out. A percentage is by far the fairest basis, as the author is then paid according to the money his play brings in, and that is the only reasonable way of assessing the financial value of any work of art. Do not be in too great a hurry to dispose of American rights. A successful production in London may double their value, and the same may be said with regard to the amateur rights of one-act plays. Judiciously managed these may become quite a source of income to an author.

Avoid indefinite and ambiguous clauses in a contract. Such a clause is "royalties not to commence until the cost of production has been paid off." See that it is made definite. Have a certain sum named to cover the cost of production. It can easily be worked out. Even if it is excessive, it is preferable to a clause that obviously leaves you at the mercy of some one else, and that does not tell you where you are. It is a good thing if it can be done to have a protective clause insuring you against your play being taken off without your consent for the sake of a mere whim on the manager's part. It would be wise to go over your contract with a solicitor, or, at any rate, a third party. Be as moderate in demands as you like, but insist upon definiteness and clearness. Know exactly where you are and leave no loopholes for misunderstanding; and do not put your pen to any clause that is not reasonable. Do as you would be done by. Neither sign, nor expect others to sign, a clause that puts one party completely in the other's power. Some authors expect managers to make any alterations they (the authors) may think fit, and vice versa. Either side should be willing to make reasonable alterations. In cases of dispute a third person should be chosen as arbiter.

It would be a good thing and simplify matters in many ways if there were a recognized fee, of course on the percentage basis, for all authors whatever their standing, as I believe there is in France. It

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might possibly curtail some of the enormous profits of the men at the top of the tree, but it would open more stalls in the market to them, and still leave possibilities for a handsome living, and it would certainly have a very harmonious effect on the conditions all round, and the trouble and heart-burnings saved would be cheap at the price.

**Last words.**—As stated in the preface, the object of this little book has been to keep practical considerations to the fore, and it has been written from the point of view of an author who has perforce to keep one eye continually on the market. But if he can manage things so that he may sometimes forget the existence of that place so much the better, and he will be wise if he puts himself into a position where he can do that, and will not have to depend on an immediate sale for his support. That is a very dangerous position and only leads to "pot boilers," and he who would keep the pot boiling with one hand and write good stuff with the other, will very likely end by finding himself unable to do either. If the pot must be boiled see that it contains some other mixture and boil it over some other fire. Get some routine work, preferably in connection with a theatre, play small parts if you can get them, or "walk on." Anything is better than double dealing! Some authors make the mistake of supposing that they have only got to get the name, and anything they do will go down. Facts have again and again proved

that this is not so, and the writer knows of a case in point where a well-known dramatist unearthed a play written previously to his first success and sold it to a manager who lost by producing it, and more than one critic hit the nail on the head. If a play has been the rounds and rejected by one man after another, it will be wiser to assume that the fault lies with the play and not with the manager. As a rule, that is the case. Of course there are exceptions, where a play after wandering around for years and being refused by one manager after another, has, when at last produced, turned out a huge success. But it is wiser to stick to the rule than the exception.

**Managers' Readers.**—My final piece of advice is one of encouragement, it is: *Be not afraid! Your MS. will be read!* Many, I know, will not believe this, the sole reason for the incredulity being, perhaps, that their plays have not, so far, been accepted. But running a theatre now-a-days is far too expensive and difficult a pastime for managers to incur the risk of turning away a possible success. To avoid such a contingency, most, if not all, employ a reader, a person competent in their opinion to read every MS. submitted, and to recommend for further inspection any play which seems at all likely to prove a marketable commodity. Many would-be dramatists are inclined to fight shy of a reader, regarding him as a mischievous sort of middleman



who prevents their plays reaching the manager's ears, whereas it is his business to see that they do so, if they are worth it. The reader is, in reality, the author's best friend, and his presence insures the possibility of all plays receiving fair consideration, a thing that would otherwise be almost impossible, for no actor-manager has time to run a theatre, play leading parts, and give fair consideration to two plays a day, which is about the average rate they come in. Authors may also think that the superior intelligence of the chief will spot merits that are likely to be overlooked by the humbler individual, but a play would not be much use for drawing purposes that required an exceptionally clever man to detect its points! And they need not be afraid of the reader scamping his work. He is generally at that stage in his profession where the extra salary means too much to run any risks of losing it through carelessness. Should their rejected ones turn up at another theatre, readers, with scene-painters, are perhaps the only ones that have cause to rejoice at a failure!

## SOME THINGS WORTH REMEMBERING

*(some of which are extracted from the foregoing chapters).*

✓ *Never* open a play with a servant soliloquizing.

✓ More than fifty per cent. of would-be dramatists do this, and if it is not a servant soliloquizing, it is two or more gossiping.

The question of expense in production is naturally a very serious one with a manager. It should be the same with a writer.

✓ One hundred words of spoken dialogue to the minute, ignoring business, is a fairly good basis upon which to calculate the time a play will take to act.

✓ Avoid the use of superlatives when recommending your own or anybody else's new play. "The finest comedy I have ever read!" does not sound nearly so convincing as "not a bad comedy!"

✓ Four acts is, as a rule, the most marketable length for a play.

Have your MS. typewritten and in duplicate.

✓ Write your name and address very distinctly on the first and last sheet of each act.

101

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## 102 THINGS WORTH REMEMBERING

- ✓ Do not point out the merits of your work in the covering letter.
- ✓ *Never* suggest personal reasons, or private necessities, as inducements for a manager to buy your work.
- ✓ Remember that your MS. is one of scores, or hundreds, and do not write to inquire after its health without giving its title, your own name, and the date of submission.
- ✓ Study carefully the policy of the manager to whom you intend to send your play, and remember that it will require a strong inducement to make him change it.
- ✓ Always send stamps for the return of the MS., and acknowledge its safe arrival when returned.
- ✓ Read it carefully over before sending it on its travels again.

If it gets very travel-worn, have it re-typed. Do not give yourself away!
- ✓ As a rule, managers prefer to read plays for themselves, not to have them read to them.
- ✓ Nor do they care much for scenarios and synopses, excepting from those who have already proved their ability to master the completed article. If a play shows genuine and practical possibilities, be sure that the manager will make it his business to see that they are realized.

*The author of this book will be glad to give advice*

## THINGS WORTH REMEMBERING 103

*as to the practical possibilities of production, merits, and placing of authors' MSS. For terms, etc., apply, The Reader of Plays, c/o A. P. Watt & Son, Hastings House, Norfolk Street, Strand, London, W.C.*



## APPENDIX A

*Copy of the Official Circular with regard  
to licensing Plays.*

*" Lord Chamberlain's Office,  
" St. James's Palace.*

" SOME Managers of Theatres, or of Travelling Companies, in the Provinces, appear to be imperfectly acquainted with the requirements of the Act for Regulating Theatres, 6 and 7 Victoria, cap. 68.

" By that Act, every Theatre in Great Britain is placed by the Legislature under the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain of His Majesty's Household, *so far as the licensing of new Stage-plays (or of new additions or interpolations to old Stage-plays)* is concerned.

" The actual Licensees (under the Local Authorities) of Provincial Theatres are, in all cases, the responsible parties under the Act. Any instance of wilful infringement of the law is officially reported by the Examiner of Stage-plays to the Local Authorities, under and by whose Licence the Theatre in which such offence shall have been committed is opened.

"It is the duty of the Licensees to ascertain beforehand that all pieces announced for representation by Travelling Companies performing at their Theatres have been duly licensed.

*"New Stage-plays are licensed for representation to the Managers of Theatres at which they are intended to be produced.* In cases where the piece is produced by the Manager of a Travelling Company the Licence is addressed to the Licensee of the Theatre in question, for the Manager of the Company, such Licensee being entirely responsible for the due observance of the Law and the Regulations by Companies performing at the Theatre of which he is the Licensee.

"New Stage-plays are Licensed for representation to Managers of Theatres, *not to the authors, of whom, as such, the Licenser has no official cognizance.*

*"With respect to the single performances of new Stage-plays, 'for Copyright purposes,' it should be understood that the Lord Chamberlain has no Copyright jurisdiction, but that his Licence is required to legalize the representation of a new Stage-play at any Theatre in Great Britain.*

"The subjoined directions may serve for future guidance.

"1. One copy of every new Stage-play, and of every new Act, Scene, or other part added to any old Stage-play, to be sent to the Examiner



*seven days at least before* the first acting or presenting thereof.

"2. Manuscript copies of new Stage-plays sent for examination and Licence should be clearly and legibly written; they are not returned, but registered and bound in volumes for preservation in the Dramatic Library of this Office. Changes of title should be notified to the Examiner of Stage-plays *beforehand*.

"3. Pantomimes are expressly included in the general designation 'Stage-plays' under the Act. It is the topical and occasional matter interpolated in Pantomimes Licensed in former years for other Theatres that requires a Licence.

"4. The Reading Fee (payable by cheque or postal order) is to be paid at the time when a new Stage-play is sent to the Examiner; and the said period of seven days shall not begin to run until the said fee shall have been paid.

"The scale of Reading Fees, as fixed by the Lord Chamberlain, in accordance with the Act of Parliament, is as follows:—

"For every Stage-play of 3 or more Acts, £2 2s.

"For every Stage-play of less than 3 Acts, £1 1s.

"All communications for the Examiner of Stage-plays to be addressed to The Lord Chamberlain's Office, St. James's Palace.

"(Signed) G. A. REDFORD,  
"Examiner of all Theatrical  
Entertainments.

“ This official Circular contains every information on the Licence for Representation of New Stage-plays when produced ‘ for hire ’ in a licensed place (not being a Music-Hall).—G. A. R.”

Should the recommendations of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the licensing and censorship of plays becomes law, a licence will not be absolutely necessary before the production of a play, but the manager producing the same without a licence does so entirely at his own risk of offending against other laws regulating public decency and morality.





## APPENDIX B

### PARTICULARS WITH REGARD TO RESTRICTIONS, ETC., IMPOSED UPON MUSIC-HALL SKETCHES.

STRICTLY speaking, music-halls are not licensed to produce stage plays, and managers of theatres could legally prevent their doing so; but an amicable arrangement has been come to by both parties and the theatre managers agree not to interfere with sketches that come within the following limitations—

(a) There must not be more than six speaking parts.

(b) The time of playing must not exceed thirty-five minutes.

The number of scenes is, of course, automatically limited by the time allowed.

As stated in Appendix C, a performance at a music-hall does not constitute a copyright.



## APPENDIX C

### (a) *Copyright in the United Kingdom.*

A REPRESENTATION in public invests the author with copyright, or playwright, to use the more distinctive term. *Copyright* has reference to the *printing* and publishing of a play, and the procedure is the same as that adopted with the copyrighting of novels, namely, registration at Stationers' Hall. *Playright* refers to the right to perform. The duration of playwright and copyright are the same, namely, forty-two years from the date of the first representation or publication in the United Kingdom, or for the lifetime of the author and seven years thereafter.

A copyright performance must take place in a public place, fully licensed for the production of plays, and the public must be admitted by payment at the doors.

Publication in print is not necessarily an infringement of playwright and vice versa.

A play enjoys playwright after its first representation in public, whether its source is copyright or not.

Action for breach of playwright may not be taken more than a twelvemonth after the offence.

Assignments or waivers of playwright must be in writing.

In the case of a musical play, both music and "book" are playrighted by a public performance, but the right of printing and publishing the music or the words is a matter of copyright.

If copyrighted matter is also playrighted, the fact should be stated on the copyright.

*(b) Copyright in the United States.*

A public performance is not necessary before copyrighting a play in the United States, but on or before its first representation a printed or type-written copy of the play must be deposited with the Librarian of Congress at Washington.

Copyright in the United States lasts for twenty-eight years from the first registration, and may be extended for fourteen years on re-registration of the right within six months of the first period.

A dramatization without permission from a copyrighted book is an infringement of copyright.

*(c) International Copyright.*

By the Berne Convention of 1887 and the Paris Act of 1896, the following countries agreed to secure for an author belonging to any one of them the same protection and rights in all the other countries as he enjoyed, or might hereafter enjoy, in his own :— Great Britain and the British Colonies, Germany, France, Prussia, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Monaco, Japan, Haiti.



Austria and Hungary joined the convention with a special reservation that excluded the following British Colonies from the benefits of the Convention, as regards themselves:—Canada, India, Africa, Tasmania and New South Wales.

The United States is not a party to the Convention, but has granted reciprocal terms to the following countries, provided they comply with the usual formalities binding United States' citizens when applying for copyright in that country:—Great Britain, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, Chili and Mexico.

An author enjoying the copy- or playwright in any of the countries of the Union, has the exclusive right of translation or authorization of the same during the entire period of his right over the original work; but that right shall terminate if it has not been exercised, and the translation duly copyrighted, within ten years from the last day of the year of the original publication or representation.

The above is really only a short *résumé* of the copyright conditions obtaining in this and other countries. Authors would be well advised to obtain specialist knowledge on the subject.

The author is indebted to Messrs. Ernst Meyer and Anthony Ellis, of the International Copyright Bureau, Dewar House, Haymarket, for valuable information on this subject.





## APPENDIX D

### SPECIMEN OF TYPE-SCRIPT

(a) *As it should be.*

CHARLES

Indeed!

SIR P-

But I acquit you. I promise you I don't think near so ill of you as I did: what I have heard has given me great satisfaction.

CHARLES

Egad, then, 'twas lucky you didn't hear any more - wasn't it, Joseph? (Apart to JOSEPH)

SIR P-

Ah! you would have retorted on him.

CHARLES

Ay, ay, that was a joke.

SIR P-

Yes, yes, I know his honour too well.

CHARLES

But you might as well have suspected him as me in this matter, for all that - mightn't he, Joseph? (Apart to JOSEPH)

SIR P-

Well, well, I believe you.

JOSEPH

Would they were both well out of the room! (Aside)

(Enter SERVANT, and whispers JOSEPH SURFACE)

SIR P-

And in future perhaps we may not be such strangers.

JOSEPH

Gentlemen, I beg pardon - I must wait on you downstairs: here is a person come on particular business.

CHARLES

Well, you can see him in another room. Sir Peter and I have not met a long time, and I have something to say to him.

JOSEPH

They must not be left together. (Aside) I'll send this man away, and return directly. - Sir Peter, not a word of the French Milliner. (Apart to SIR PETER and

Goes out.)



(b) *As a reader likes to see it. A type-script de luxe.*

CHARLES

Indeed!

SIR P-

But I acquit you. I promise you I don't think near so ill of you as I did: what I have heard has given me great satisfaction.

CHARLES

Egad, then, t'was lucky you didn't hear any more - wasn't it, Joseph? (Apart to JOSEPH)

SIR P-

Ah! you would have retorted on him.

CHARLES

Ay, ay, that was a joke.

SIR P-

Yes, yes, I know his honour too well.

CHARLES

But you might as well have suspected him as me in this matter, for all that - mightn't he, Joseph? (Apart to JOSEPH)

SIR P- Well, well, I believe you.

JOSEPH Would they were both well out of the room! (Aside)

(Enter SERVANT, and whispers JOSEPH SURFACE)

SIR P- And in future, perhaps we may not be such strangers.

JOSEPH Gentlemen, I beg pardon - I must wait on you downstairs: here is a person come on particular business.

CHARLES Well, you can see him in another room. Sir Peter and I have not met a long time, and I have something to say to him.

JOSEPH They must not be left together. (Aside) I'll send this man away, and return directly. - Sir Peter, not a word of the French milliner. (Apart to SIR PETER and

Goes out.)



(c) *As it should not be.*

ever since you bought that horrible place in Park Lane -

SIR JOHN (with a quick look at her)

It is a horrible place isn't it? <sup>M.D. H.C. So</sup> I thought ~~that~~ when I bought it!

MRS DALGETTY

Why did you buy it?

SIR JOHN

<sup>M.D. had no one about public opinion -</sup>  
I had no choice!

<sup>Sir John. No, but it came about me.</sup>  
MRS DALGETTY (with a sniff) <sup>It takes me under its wing and</sup> would let us go -

~~Because~~ it was the only one on the market!

SIR JOHN

No, but I was! All the other millionaires had got houses in Park Lane!  
It was expected <sup>of me</sup> of me! Public opinion was too much for me! It always  
has been! (then he stops and looks hard at her) All the same Mrs Dalgetty  
although I am a millionaire, I am not a fool in every respect! (She

raises her eyebrows) Perhaps I had better tell you that the house in Park Lane has already got a house-keeper - her name is Trubsham & a most respectable and <sup>most</sup> ~~worthy~~ <sup>old</sup> body, who does her work thoroughly well, especially the ~~chief~~ <sup>most</sup> part of it which is keeping out of my way. Perhaps it has reached your ears that I am a misogynistic kind of a person and have no place in my life for a woman. A great many have been to this office, especially since I've had that house in Park Lane. It's no use saying that I have an appointment because they always manage to get in somehow. A woman always does.

You seldom see a crowd or gathering of any sort but what women are in the majority, especially in the front row! What ~~they~~ <sup>they</sup> cannot do by moral force ~~they~~ <sup>we</sup> generally succeed in accomplishing by their physical weakness! Oh, you will get the vote all right, and you'll get into the House all right, and into the government and every blessed billet too. Well, well, if the Prime Minister is to be an old woman, I would sooner he were the genuine article!





## APPENDIX E

### A PAGE FROM THE PROMPT COPY.

THIS page is from the MS. of an author who had had practical experience in the production of plays and whose work lay in the theatre, yet a glance is sufficient to show how much had to be weeded out as superfluous and injurious to the dramatic effect. As a matter of fact, this particular sheet was a re-typed interpolated one, the original having become illegible on account of the numberless corrections, cuts and alterations, but much evidently still remained to be done! A careful study of the cuts and corrections here reproduced will reveal their dramatic value, such as it is!



18th Cnd  
Division  
Bella

doesn't need to

X factor

lights full on.

2. I O Y dth-ONE-ET-DO

Scene. Same as act one. Three hours.

(LINDA discovered at the telephone)

Oh - Hallo! ~~Will you please~~ 2317 western please! - Thank you! (waits) Oh - hallo! Is that St. Mary's Hospital - Has a lady been brought in this afternoon - elderly - about fifty? Oh, When did you say? ~~Oh~~ Yes that might be about the time - ~~see~~ (Pause) Yes - Carlyon! Miss Hetty Carlyon! She will have it marked on her clothes, H.M.O. - yes, ~~you will find it~~ ~~marked on her clothes~~. ~~Re-look~~ Thank you so much! ~~patient pause~~ ~~Oh how sorry~~ (Somewhat excited, in- names) No, that wouldn't be her! She's ~~quite different~~ ~~never~~ ~~seems~~ hand-me- down! Thank you so much - ~~Sorry~~ and to have troubled you! (looks down at paper by her side and crosses off name with pencil - then rings up again) I'm very sorry to give you so much trouble but I am making enquiries that must be made. ~~I expect to much longer now!~~ Will you please give me 446 Avenue! Thank you! Oh - Hallo! Is that the London Hospital! Has a lady been brought in this afternoon! ~~at~~ Yes, she ~~will be~~, a real lady!

No, none of them are there! Thank you, mach!  
 (crossing off a name) Thank goodness - That finishes the  
 hospital. Is there anyone else now? Oh! (Rings up after  
 looking up number) 2372 Western please! This is the last  
 one! Thank you! (Enter BELLA) Oh - is that the fire  
 Brigader? Oh, has a lady been brought in this afternoon -  
 I know it isn't but you never know - She might have been  
 run over by one of your engines! (Puts down receiver)  
 (Lums and sees Bella)  
 (sarcasatically) Have ye rung up the dogs home at Battersea  
 Miss Linnie?

(sarcastically) Have ye rung up the dogs home at Battersea  
Miss Linnie?

Don't be absurd Bella! Of course we can't have a stone unturned! I've rung up all the hospitals, and there's been nothing answering to her description at any of them!

(Coming down)

Perhaps she doesn't answer to it herself by this time!

Don't bombinate BULLS -

Have ye rung up the police? ~~Yes, yes, yes?~~

⑩ (Thinks hard)

# Hands waiting  
in 81 yrs.

\$ Don't be rude!!

**BELLA**

**LINDA**

# BELLA

LINDA

BELLA



APPENDIX F  
SPECIMENS OF COVERING LETTER.

(a) *As it should be.*

(Date.)

(Author's address.)

DEAR SIR,

I beg to offer the enclosed . . . . Act play,  
entitled . . . . to you for your consideration,  
and enclose a stamped addressed envelope for its  
return, in the event of its proving unsuitable.

Yours very faithfully,

(Author's name.)

*To the Manager,  
. . . . . Theatre,  
London, W.C.*

A letter that commends itself, the author, and the  
play !

(b) *As it should not be.*

(Date omitted.)

(*Author's address.*)

DEAR SIR,

I am enclosing with this a new four-act comedy, which I have just completed, and to which I hope you will give your personal consideration at the earliest possible moment. I wish to draw your special attention to the principal character in the play, which offers a very fine opportunity to you as an actor, and indeed is such a strong character that I do not think there is any other actor at present on our stage who could do justice to its dramatic possibilities. I may mention that the object of the play is to expose the evils of the present state of high society, so that by producing it you will not only be rendering a service to the whole dramatic profession by the discovery of a new author, but also to society and the country at large.

I shall be very glad indeed to make any alterations you may suggest, and may mention that should you care to put the play into immediate rehearsal, I shall be up in London next week and pleased to talk it over with you . . . etc.,

Yours very truly,

(*Author's name.*)

A letter that does not commend itself, or the author, or the play.



## APPENDIX G

### SOME PLAY-PRODUCING CLUBS AND SOCIETIES

#### (a) IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.

THE INCORPORATED STAGE SOCIETY,  
9, Arundel Street, Strand, W.C.

*Secretary:* A. E. Drinkwater.

*Object:* The production of original modern plays by English, and translations of the same by foreign authors. The Stage Society enjoys the advantage of not being under the Censor's régime, in that admission is by invitation only, and no money is taken at the doors.

#### THE PLAY-ACTORS.

*Secretary:* Winifred Mayo, 3, Bedford Street, Strand, W.C.

*Object:* The production of original modern plays, acted by the members of the club, who are all professionals.

THE ENGLISH DRAMA SOCIETY,  
192, Shaftesbury Avenue, W.C.

*Object*: The production of literary and artistic plays by new and old authors in a manner worthy the highest traditions of art unhampered by public opinion and the necessity for popularity.

THE IRISH NATIONAL THEATRE SOCIETY,  
Middle Abbey Street, Dublin.

*Directors*: Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats.

*Manager*: S. L. Robinson.

*Object*: The discovery and exploitation of native talent, and the performance of classic works.

THE MANCHESTER REPERTORY THEATRE,  
Gaiety Theatre, Manchester.

*Proprietress*: Miss Horniman.

*Manager*: B. Iden Payne.

*Object*: The artistic production of plays of all sorts and descriptions, which are not allowed to exhaust themselves in a long run, but become part of the continuous programme, which changes weekly throughout the season.



THE GLASGOW REPERTORY THEATRE,  
Royalty Theatre, Glasgow.

*Manager*: Alfred Wareing.

*Object*: Similar to that of the Manchester Repertory Theatre. Special attention is given to native Scottish talent.

At the time of writing a repertory theatre is also being mooted in Edinburgh.

(b) IN THE UNITED STATES.

THEATREGOERS' CLUB,  
200, West Seventy-second Street, New York.

*Object*: The exploitation and discovery of native talent.

PLAYWRIGHTS' LEAGUE CLUB,  
127, West Fortieth Street, New York.

*Object*: Discovery and exploitation of talent, new and old.

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